



JOHN RANTOUL

HENRY
LOOMIS
NELSON

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JOHN RANTOUL

JOHN RANTOUL

BY

HENRY LOOMIS NELSON

And in the soul within the sense began
The manlike passion of a godlike man;
And in the sense within the soul again
Thoughts that make men of gods and gods of men

SWINBURNE



BOSTON
JAMES R. OSGOOD AND COMPANY

1885

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Press of Rockwell and Churchill, Boston

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JOHN RANTOUL.

CHAPTER I.

HE RETURNS NO MORE "SENSIBLE."

"HALLO—O Captain!" The clear voice which rang out on the bright June day had a hearty, manly, music in it that made one think of fresh breezes, and tossing waves, and all quick-moving, abounding, life. It recalled the rhythm of old sea-songs, and aroused a desire for a brisk walk across the downs or a clamber over the red rocks on the shore, or a rapid gallop on the country roads, or for a sailful of wind and a lively boat rushing through the water and marking her way with a deluge of silver spray. It was the voice of a young man aglow with love of existence. It was rich and full, and evidently unused to battling with the winds and waves of the Cape Ann coast, a conflict which generally results in keeping the voices of the native salts below in their cabins, in calm weather, where they growl unintelligibly, reserving themselves for sea use, and for times when they are forced on deck by the elements.

The voice inspired a feeling of friendliness for its owner, and one would have said that very little shadow had obscured the brightness of the world of the man whose very tones betrayed such satisfaction with life.

The young man who owned the voice was worthy of it. As he called out to the captain of the fishing-smack, who was arranging his lines in the cove below, he vaulted a fence and stood on the cliff that looks over Straitsmouth and Thatcher's Island out to the blue waters of the Atlantic. His walk on the downs in the vigorous air had emphasized the strong points of his manly beauty. He was dressed in flannel, which was so light that the fresh breeze, playing with it, moulded it to his shapely legs, and clearly marked their strong outlines. His chest was expanded to its full, as though he would fill his lungs to the utmost with the invigorating salt air. The wind and sun had bronzed him, but they had not wholly hidden the vermilion of his cheek, and the dark olive of his complexion. His full lips were rich in color; his dark eyes were flashing as in exultation in his strength and in his perfect command of his fine body.

The captain looked up the beach. There was no owner for the voice there. Then he looked down the beach. There was no one there. He had been met by a perplexing problem, and was trying to loosen a lot of lines which were entangled with a pound net.

"War be ye, John?" asked the captain. There was a twinkle in his eye when he said this. It was evident that he approved of himself.

"I'm up here, my friend; but how did you know who it was?"

"Ye don't suppose that I ken forget a voice I've known as long's I hev yourn, in five year, do ye?"

"Well, I don't know what you can do in that line, captain, but I can forget a voice in five minutes, if I try hard."

The young man was making his way down the cliff. He jumped from foothold to foothold, not using his hands at all, always sure of his leaps, dexterously avoiding the salt puddles which had been left in the hollows of the rocks by the receding tide, until finally he stood on the shingly beach by the side of the old fisherman. It was what is known on the North Shore as a "dirty beach." It was full of kelp, and the line of the last high tide was marked by a variety of unsavory objects. First and most prominent were the sea-grasses, dry and unbeautiful out of their native element, and mingled with them were broken bits of wood, old junk in the form of bottles that had retired from the business of lightening the mariner's heart, while here and there a dead dog-fish which had been captured as he was preying, with his savage fellows, on a school of mackerel, and relieved of his sounds for gelatinous purposes, added the necessary element of animal nature to the picture of still life. Not far from the captain was an old wreck,

and out in the little cove were the two red-gray rocks that had made it. As the sun lighted them up on this pleasant day, and as the waves danced about them coquettishly receiving the advances of the bright rays, and at the same time taking to their bosoms the deep blue sky, and the soft white clouds, and the strong shadows of the rocks themselves, they appeared innocent enough. But they had a different aspect on the cruel night when the waters were angry and lashed themselves into a white fury against them, and when they, in turn, struck and ground and tore the ship, until the sea secured and devoured its human prey, and tossed the poor fragments of the vessel high up on the shelving, stony, beach.

When John Rantoul reached the beach, he shook hands with the captain, and there was a certain enthusiasm in his greeting, and a certain suggestion of pleasure in the captain's face, which indicated that the two might not have seen each other for a month or so.

"Wall, ye haint grow'd none," said the old man, rolling his tobacco around. He had not risen from his seat on a dory, nor had he stopped fingering the lines and net that were spread out on his lap and over the boat.

"I wasn't much of a chicken when I went away, you know. I passed the growing age some years ago."

"Humph!" grunted the captain, "leastways I hope you've grow'd more sensible. Folks say, though, that you're jest as onsartin as ever, and that you haint no mind for doctor's business yet."

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"Folks are right, I guess, captain; I've too much respect for you and them to spend my life experimenting on your bodies with drugs and knives." Rantoul had stretched himself at full length on the beach, and, with his hands clasped under his head, he looked out over the placid waters. Suddenly turning to the captain, who was thinking of the best method of discovering if John had acquired any new experiences during his five years' absence, and what they might be, the young man asked:—

"How did you know I had come home?"

"Because I read it into the county paper. Big folks can't come from Europe without it's printed, ken they? Besides, Jed Smart's alive yet."

"So you've talked me all over at the store, have you?"

"I can't say that we've talked you all over yet, for you're a big subject, John,— 't any rate Jed thinks you consider yourself so,— but we've made purty consid'r'ble progress with you, and we hope you'll last till the summer boarders get here."

John Rantoul laughed in his cheery way, and seemingly bore no malice against the gossipers who, he knew, had pulled him to pieces at Jed Smart's big store, where oil, rope, groceries, and Medford rum were retailed, and where personal criticism was disposed of at wholesale. Jed Smart was a sharp creature,—"smart by name and smart by natur'" the neighbors used to say,— and he thoroughly disapproved of John, who had never made a trade in his life,

except occasionally when the two were boys together, and then John always bought the best jack-knife and Jed always owned it after it had been a few days in John's pocket. A man who couldn't swap and dicker, without invariably coming out at the "little eend," might be a very desirable victim for the cunning store-keeper, but he was "no shakes of a man."

"Never'll amount to nothin'," Jed said; "know him from stem to stern, and I tell ye he haint no keel to stan' on. Never'll make nothin' 'f himself, and wunt keep what the doctor leaves him longer 'n it'll take to make one good trade with him."

CHAPTER II.

AN ARTIST IN AN UNCONGENIAL ATMOSPHERE.

JOHN RANTOUL had returned home after an absence of five years. He came to see his mother who had been the friend and comrade of his boyhood. She was a pretty, refined, woman, whose ancestors had been the preachers of her native village for two hundred and fifty years. John, so the local gossips said, "favored his mother;" the doctor, John's father, was a harsh, stern man, whose father and grandfather before him, had been the medical advisers of the community. The old man — he was much older than his wife — sprang from a hard race, and his principle in life was to come by his own, no matter what might happen to any one else. Once only had there gleamed from him anything like sentiment, and that was when he fell in love with pretty Mary Davis, and for a few months after his marriage.

But the motive which he had determined should guide him during life was altogether too strong for sentiment, and the doctor in his own home soon ceased to differ from the doctor out-of-doors and among the townsfolk. He was harsh there as he was elsewhere, and lack of sympathy was to Mrs. Rantoul what lack of sunlight is to delicate flowers;

she lived a desolate existence, beautiful in its charities, breathing a soft sweetness on those who came in contact with her, and who were receptive of such qualities as she had, meeting quietly and uncomplainingly the exacting demands made upon her as the doctor's house-keeper, but wholly wanting in the brilliant coloring which had once been promised. When John came to her she did not resume her outward cheerfulness, but she felt a certain inward happiness which renewed her beauty and again attracted the doctor until he once more forgot her in his interest in a new lot trade.

John's boyhood and early youth alternated between ugly contests with his father and endearments from his mother. The doctor never understood his son, and tried to thwart him at every point. He disliked his skill in drawing and trembled for his future when he heard the school-master's repeated reports of John's inefficiency in mental arithmetic. That the boy was the most athletic and lovable boy on the Cape was nothing. The father wanted him to grow up to be a thrifty getter of money, and his successor as the village doctor. Mrs. Rantoul wept many bitter tears over John's frequent punishments, and grieved greatly that the husband whom she feared and the son she loved could not or would not be better friends. But the boy was always her faithful lover, and mother and son were proud of one another, and very happy whenever they were together. It was she who fed his imagination, and strengthened that side

of his nature which the doctor always characterized as "womanish."

When John finished the part of his education which he was supposed to acquire at school and college, the doctor insisted that he should at once begin the study of medicine. The doctor's father and grandfather before him had been the village physicians, and the harsh old man had determined as soon as his son was born that the boy should be the fourth Dr. Rantoul. He could not imagine Stonecliff prosperous without a Doctor Rantoul. John demurred, but the upshot of it all was that he passed the summer stagnating over Gray's Anatomy and the Materia Medica, and making pen-and-ink sketches on the blotting-paper.

Finally, he grew to hate his uncongenial occupation so fiercely he determined that he would not be a doctor, no matter what his father might say to the contrary. When he told his mother this, she was secretly both pleased and a little frightened. She had an ambition for her son which could not be satisfied by his becoming a country doctor, for she believed in his artistic talent. She regarded him as a genius when he brought her his first rude drawing on a slate, and her belief gained strength with the renewed evidences of his talent which he gave as he grew to manhood. Therefore, almost hesitatingly, and after many days of reflection had failed to point out to John a more comfortable employment than the healing of bodies, she suggested that he be an artist.

The young man had never thought of securing bread and butter from what had always been his pleasure, but he acceded at once and enthusiastically to his mother's proposal. And when he recognized his calling, his determination to pursue it had a quality of stiffness and obduracy about it which would have greatly gratified the doctor himself, provided the cause had been the more sanctified one of medicine.

As soon as John's purpose was announced to his father there was a stormy scene. That had been expected by the two conspirators ; but in the end the persistence of the mother, who had undertaken to carry on the struggle in her boy's behalf, prevailed. The doctor saw that his son could not be bent to his purpose, and, besides, it grew more evident every day that John would be an abject failure as a physician. The result was that the doctor concluded that the boy had no common sense, and dismissed him to be an artist or anything else he might choose in the vagabond and tramp line. He would have no further concern with him ; the grim pride he had expected to take in leaving his son as his successor departed ; the infinitesimal fissure in his hard heart, from which came the almost imperceptible essence of affection for his boy, closed completely ; he became still more stern and silent, devoted himself still more to his trade and his practice, chilled more the atmosphere of his home ; in short, as a near neighbor unkindly said, fulfilled more completely his hateful destiny. There had been, at first, a few battles—

short, and, on the doctor's side, angry. He was astounded at meeting opposition from his wife. It was the first time in their married life his blunt "No" had not settled matters. She had before this been willing to yield to his bitter commands, and had done his somewhat cruel bidding. But now she contended with her maternal courage, and withstood his stormy denials of her suit with a fine obstinacy which at last attained its object and met with its reward. The doctor surrendered with bad grace, saying:—

"I suppose if you must have your way, you must; but you're humorin' John's idle, worthless, disposition. There aint only one kind o' paintin' that's useful in this world, and that's house paintin'. I'd a good deal ruther see a son o' mine on a ladder earnin' an honest penny at a man's business, than to see him coverin' cotton cloth with woman's fancies. Like enough he'll wear velvet clothes and long hair, and go hungry. Bah! It sickens me to think of a Rantoul in such a paltry business as makin' picters. It's a wonder that you haint learned him worsted work and embroidery. What's his education good for, if he's goin' to play all his life? But I wash my hands of him and his affairs. Ef he don't like my business, no more do I like his, and I don't want to see any of his daubs in my house, and I wunt. What's more, he sha'n't live on my earnin's, and I shan't give him a cent to idle on. You and he ken have your way, but don't let me hear anythin' of his foolish performances. Ef you want to

throw away what little money you have, as you have your senses, you ken do it ; but don't ask me to pay for the boy's idlin', for I wunt, I tell ye once for all."

Therefore, John had been in Europe studying his chosen profession in the great galleries, and now he had come home, having given some promise, although not much fruit, in the way of pictures, had been gathered from his ripened mind. His mother had made the sacrifice for him, and given him the means of acquiring his training.

The last and most important possession which she parted with was her father's library. The books, accumulated by that famous race of New England preachers, of which he was the last, were fittingly purchased by the town. They had been the source of the religious instruction of at least three generations of the people of Stonecliff. Therefore, it was proper that they should go into the public library, on the upper shelves of which storehouse of neglected learning, sprinkled cautiously and conservatively with well-thumbed fiction, they made an imposing array. No one read them in the advanced days which had overtaken them, and the dust from the sweeping of the room gathered on them, as a compensation, probably, for the theological dust with which they had cobwebbed clerical minds in days long since gone by. The books were sold with a sigh for their memories, but the money that was to come from them was to go to making her boy happy, and perhaps famous, and the mother knew of no better way

to use the gathered stores of the past, than for the glory of the future. John accepted the sacrifice carelessly. He did not then appreciate this rare woman's love.

As the artist lay on the beach Capt. Symonds told him what the gossips said about him. The old fisherman was John's friend then and always, and he did not repeat the caustic speeches of Jed. Smart, and Lawyer Persons (John's old classmate at college), and of the idlers at the store, in an unkind and malicious spirit. He wanted the young man to fully appreciate his status in his old home, and to understand, precisely, what he must contend with, if he remained among the people of Stonecliff. Therefore, the captain spoke of the common belief that John was an idle and frivolous person who had no ambition to "get on;" that even as a painter he was not a success; that his indifference to the welfare of the old town, as shown by his persistent refusal to go to town meetings while the site of the new railway station was under discussion, was proof of a lack in his moral make-up; that his life in Europe, and his inappreciation of church and political privileges, indicated very plainly that he was an antagonistic feature in New England civilization. In a word, the captain opened John's eyes to the fact that the old comrades of his boyhood and youth were jealous of him, and were unfriendly.

Slowly the atmosphere of the place changed for John. Even the presence of his old friend became

disturbing; the sunlight lost its brightness; the cheerful red in the rocks gave way to the gray; the noises of the birds grew harsh and strident; the waves ceased to dance, and their movement and sounds suggested less the thoughtless joyfulness of playful children, and more the sullenness and murmur of an angry mob. John's face lost its cheerfulness. His eyes did not sparkle, but looked far out beyond the range of vision into his own life, and especially into its accomplishments. The villagers were right, — he had done nothing. Before he met the captain that morning he was content to live; to breathe intoxicating draughts of pure air; to feel himself the possessor of an almost boundless activity; to look frankly into human eyes and see no guile there, nor any such mean vice as enmity or jealousy; to be at peace with himself and the world about him; to do what work he had, enjoying the pleasures of success and not over-much disturbed by occasional failure; looking forward to possible fame vaguely and dreamily, and with only a half-defined purpose of achieving it if his powers were adequate to the task. He had just quitted his mother, who, up to this time, had been the dearest friend of his life. Others there were who occasionally awakened him to a sense of his own unfruitfulness, and his infidelity to his opportunities; but the rude shocks these gave him pained him for a moment, filled him with a temporary remorse, sent him to his studio and to hard work for a week perhaps, but when a point had

been achieved, — a picture finished, or a success scored in any trifling detail, — the delicious pleasure of basking in the sunshine of his immediate success made him close his ears to stern demands; he was content with what he had, and to dream of what he might attain in some undefined way and by some untried exertion.

When the captain finished his story he waited for awhile, as if for some comment, but as none was made he went on.

"Wall," said he; "what be ye doin' down to Boston?"

The question aroused John, and, rising from his couch of sand, he answered with a good deal of spirit: "I'm doing what the people of Stonecliff don't, and never will, appreciate; I'm painting pictures — at least I'm going to."

The captain's eyes twinkled a little at this qualification, noticing which, John added: —

"You think that painting pictures is all play, and I know that sailing around in a boat and fishing is the best kind of sport, while you pretend to think it the hardest kind of work. You see we have different points of view. But Stonecliff needn't fear but that I shall earn my living by painting pictures, and, besides, my life will be pleasanter than if I devoted myself to poisoning people with nasty pills. I suppose Jed Smart's right, — I can't trade; but then I don't want to. Perhaps that's never occurred to him."

Saying this he bade the captain good-morning. He had heard enough to make him serious, and he walked out into the high way not so joyous as he was when he started on his tramp. The air was heavy with the odor of the wild roses which reddened the way side and clambered over the stone walls ; the sunlight poured down in rich floods on the charming landscape, but John did not heed the beauty which an hour before had been an exquisite pleasure to him. He had been bitterly and cruelly stung.

When he reached his father's house his mother was waiting for him. She had permitted herself to be very happy in anticipations of a pleasant summer, but as soon as she saw him her heart told her that she was to hear unpleasant tidings. And John, looking at her, saw in her face the question which she longed to ask and yet dared not.

Suddenly he laid his head on his mother's shoulder, and tenderly kissing her delicate hand, said : —

"Mother, you are very good."

"I have tried to be good to my boy," she answered in a tone which showed that she was making an effort to control herself.

He noticed this and went on lightly : —

"Yes, my dear, and you've succeeded very well, and your boy is very much in love with you."

"Then I have my reward, — all the reward I ask," she said softly.

After an inward struggle which her face betrayed, she added : —

"John, what has happened this morning that is unpleasant to you?"

"Why do you think that anything unpleasant has happened, mother? I haven't been very badly used by the world since I left the sheltering nest. You have a lively imagination, dear."

But she was not deceived by his answer, and she told him so.

"I know that face and those eyes too well not to read your heart correctly. You are not as happy as you were when you went away this morning."

"Well, really, I don't see why I shouldn't be. I've the same mother, and she is just as beautiful as she always was."

But the mother insisted. Now that she had determined to know the worst she felt the necessity of removing all doubt at once. Her first thought was that her pleasant dream was over, and that her boy was again to go away from her, but her fear was that the doctor's harshness might be the cause; she was not surprised therefore, when John told her that he had abandoned his plan of spending the summer with her. He had intended to gratify his mother, and, at the same time, to do a good deal of preparatory work for the winter, and now he found it very difficult to tell her that he must deprive her of the only ray of happiness she had known for many years. She was glad to hear that it was not the doctor who was responsible for John's unhappiness, and she appreciated the force of the reasoning

which induced her son to conclude that he could not breathe the chilling atmosphere of Stonecliff. John had not determined to disappoint his mother until he made trial of the effect of her presence. He found it soothing, but it did not change his mood. He was not inspirited or encouraged by her, and he believed that he needed other surroundings. His conversation with the captain had determined him to show the carping critics of Stonecliff that he had something in him they little dreamed of, and, for the moment, he longed for his studio. He imagined himself busy enriching his canvases with glowing color, and his mounting ambition left no room for the gentler sentiment for his mother.

It was a bitter story for the poor woman, though of course John did not tell her all his thoughts; boys rarely do make full confession at the maternal shrine. But she gathered enough to understand that the busy gossips of Stonecliff had succeeded, even in the brief time during which he had been at home, in destroying the young man's happiness, and her resentment of the injury and injustice done her boy enabled her to bear her trial more bravely, and to withdraw more resignedly from the beautiful world which his nearness had made, to the dull, cold, routine of existence with the doctor.

She did not try to change her son's determination. Even if she had wished to make the attempt she recognized too well that the one trait he had inherited from his father was wilfulness. She told him

with a sigh which greatly touched him, that he knew "what was best;" she spoke as bitter words as her kind lips could utter of the cruel people who did not feel the pride they ought in the genius which she had given them; and she gently kissed his forehead as she left him to go to her room, where she might close the too brief chapter of her summer's gladness in tears.

A day or two later Mrs. Rantoul watched, with a smile on her face, the train which bore John to the city. But her heart was heavy, and when she turned again towards home, the place was so forbidding that she wandered off over the downs, through the wild roses which John loved, until, reaching a familiar rock under whose shadow she and her boy had often sat together, she looked longingly out on the quiet waters of the bay as if asking the secret of the rest and peace that had been bestowed on them, but which, through well-nigh fifty years of life, she had rarely known.

CHAPTER III.

A TEMPTATION AND OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

MEANWHILE John was speeding on his way to the city. He had made no definite plans, but he was filled with indefinite longings and aspirations. These so completely satisfied him, and made him so thoroughly self-contented, that he did not look about the car until he was half-way to Boston. Then, happening to secure an idle moment from his reverie, he glanced ahead of him, and took in the somewhat monotonous but interesting life which one meets on the suburban railway trains of the metropolis of New England. There was the customary school-teacherish young woman, three or four other women on their way to town to do shopping, and there was a crowd of men reading the newspapers, and all bent on business. To these busy creatures there was an exception. The exception was a young, good-looking, well-dressed man, with Boston written all over him. He had finished his newspaper, having read the foreign and domestic news with avidity, paid some respect to a little of the correspondence, never once consulted the markets, glanced at the editorials with an air of superiority, and having

finally thrown away the paper with evident contempt, when his eye fell on the literary notices. Then he looked out of the window, for it was plain that the last objects in which he could be interested were his fellow-travellers.

As soon as John saw this young man he looked at him as if to assure himself of his identity; then, when his first glance of hopeful suspicion settled into a confirmed look of recognition, he went over, and greeted him, calling him Scolly.

Scolly looked carelessly around, and said, with that quiet cordiality with which Americans express that they are a good deal happier to see an old friend than they care to show, —

“How do you do, Rantoul? I’m very glad to see you.”

He shook hands with John and made a place for him on the seat beside him.

“I haven’t seen you for an age. And I had begun to think you had made up your mind to become part of some American colony abroad.”

John disclaimed ever having had any intention of expatriating himself, but he confessed to having thoroughly enjoyed the “other side;” and the chat wandered off easily and naturally to travel and common acquaintances abroad, finally drifting back to Boston and the clubs. Just as the train was crossing the bridge before entering the station, Scolly said: —

“I’m very glad to run across you again, and I hope to see a good deal of you. Can’t you come

down the coast with us? Two or three of us have a schooner and we're going to make a cruise as far as Mt. Desert. We'll stop along the way, and we'll have a good time. Say you'll go, old man; there's a bunk for you, and you know the other men."

John was greatly tempted, and he began to cast about for an excuse which would make his going compatible with his good resolutions. At first he resolutely declined, on the ground that he must get to work. But his stalwart companion laughed good-naturedly at John's excuse, and told him that, if he were bound to work, he couldn't have a better opportunity for sketching than the proposed cruise would afford him. John's resistance grew fainter and fainter; he half accepted Scolly's view; revolted a little at the thought that going would be at least constructive disloyalty to his mother, and finally consented to think over the invitation, and to send his decision to Scolly in a day or two.

The hot June sun was doing its work vigorously as John made his way to his rooms. The grass on the Common was burned brown, street arabs cooled themselves by wading through the water of the pond to the detriment of their scanty clothing; the benches on the mall were strangely vacant, only one stray couple of lovers gracing the whole long promenade usually so full of amorous pairs. When he reached his rooms he was hot and tired and cross. The few notes on his table were uninteresting, and the janitor informed him that

no one had called. He tried to get himself into a working frame of mind, but his surroundings were oppressive. "I have lost my grip again," he said. His purpose of at once setting about his task was gone, but he did not admit this to himself. He was too warm for exertion, and he finally concluded that a cold bath and fresh clothes would bring him back to his good intentions; but they did not. He looked over some sketches with a half-defined determination to select one for completion, but Scolly's invitation disturbed him. He did not want to lose the chance of a long sail in a good yacht farther down the Maine coast than he had ever been. He came so near accepting at one moment that he actually began a note to his friend, but a sudden recollection of the sneers of the Stonecliff people, of his mother, and of Scolly's own amused incredulity, stung him so sharply that he threw down his pen, and walked up and down his room. The janitor had made good use of the time during which John was absent, and had put the room painfully to rights. The shades were down, the blinds closed, no dissipated and disorganizing ray of light found a crack to struggle through, no friendly dust or scattered grains of tobacco were on the writing-desk, the chairs were ranged in order, the books were piled up with mathematical precision, the mantle ornaments were stationed at their proper posts, no loose papers told of a bustling presence. The room was so neat

as to be cruelly inhospitable. John could not bring himself to sit down in its respectable presence. His studio was precisely as bad. The brushes and palettes had been carefully washed and put away, linen cloths shrouded the easels, and the half-finished pictures looked grim and ghostly in the gloom. The hangings of rich colored stuffs which John had intended should make his rooms warm and comfortable, looked like black palls; the plaster casts, and grotesque bronzes and pottery, which had seemed so full of interest to him when he last saw them under the cheerful gas-light, had become mere shadows.

Finally he uttered an impatient exclamation, — an exclamation in the debatable land between propriety and profanity, — and pushing open the blinds said : —

“Let’s have a little wholesome air and sunshine on this subject. This place is as bad as a tomb.”

Then, thinking for a moment, he continued reflectively : —

“Why shouldn’t I go on this cruise? No artist ever stays in the city in the summer. It’s the season for nature. I ought to be storing up subjects for next winter’s work, and if I’m to have subjects I must go to nature for them. Besides, I can’t stand this heat and desolation. Nobody’s in town, and if I stay, I shall be too blue to live. It’s my duty to go.” And he accepted the situation.

The cruise was delightful. The weather was perfect, almost all the men of the party were congenial, the larder was well stored, and the cooking

was good enough. John had plenty to talk about, and plenty to listen to, for that matter, for it was his first opportunity since his return from Europe, to hear of all that had happened to the men and women whom he knew. He did very little work ; in fact, beyond trying to catch the quick-moving colors of a lot of mackerel swimming about in a pound net, a sunrise at Appledore, and a curious sunset effect of red clouds and green sky, and the black, unfinished fort at the entrance of Portsmouth harbor, he did absolutely nothing. One of the jests of the company was John's serious assertions of industrious intention. Finally Mt. Desert was reached.

"If you're not too busy, Rantoul, breakfast is ready," said Scolly, as the schooner's anchor chains rattled out, and her sails came down with an alacrity which almost indicated a consciousness on their part, that they were at last to have a rest.

John was devoting himself to a luxurious morning nap, and though he had heard the gibe often enough, he did not enjoy it, for his conscience always became unruly, and reminded him of its existence whenever his jocular companions urged his devotion to his art as a reason for not undertaking some suggested diversion from the trip, or for delay in some particularly attractive spot.

The few sketches he had made, however, showed a deft hand guided by unusual talent, and the men who jested with him respected him, and loved to listen to his off-hand lectures on art, and his

talk of his own purposes. Even the skipper paid unconscious tribute to his skill, in acknowledging that a little memorandum in oil looked "mighty like them wrigglin' mack'rel." There could be no doubt that John was a colorist of no mean capacity; and he felt, too, a sense of satisfaction with his own work, which brought him a pleasure only less gratifying than the pleasure he derived from arousing the interest of others.

As they were going ashore on the day of their arrival at Mt. Desert, Scolly said to John:—

"Do you know that Mrs. Holladay is here?"

"Who is Mrs. Holladay?" was the answer.

"You don't mean to say that she didn't send you cards?"

"Yes, I mean to say that Mrs. Holladay, whoever she may be, didn't send me cards, whatever that may mean."

Scolly was too polite to express his astonishment by an ejaculation; therefore, he simply announced that Mrs. Holladay used to be Miss Fanny Stockbridge, with whom John was once supposed to be in love. The discarded lover, if he were discarded, received the information very quietly, and, asking after his old flame, found that she had married well, that her husband was rich, and that she spent her winters in Washington, and her summers anywhere on the coast, from the St. Lawrence to Newport. When he reached the hotel he found himself making inquiries as to her whereabouts, and was both aston-

ished and pleased to discover that he was under the same roof with her. Then followed the pleasurable excitement of uncertainty as to his reception from the woman with whom he had, some years before, when he was very young, relations that at least threatened to become tender.

He had not long to wait for the solution of his doubts, for, before he had been on land an hour, he found Mrs. Holladay on the shady side of the house. With her were a couple of admiring youths in knickerbockers. She greeted John with a quiet cordiality, which became enthusiastic when she learned who were his companions. The party made a really valuable accession to the few men who were at the place, and Mrs. Holladay fully appreciated the advantages of knowing all of this last important arrival.

In a few minutes the knickerbockers went off to play tennis, and left John alone with this pretty woman, prettier than he had ever seen her in a costume which was made for the purpose of suggesting that its wearer devoted herself to heathful exercise, without being unbecoming.

"I'm so glad to see you, Mr. Rantoul," she began, in a brisk way. "Have you been long back?"

John gave her the information she sought, but he was a little nervous; he wanted to get back to an easy footing with her, but he wanted, too, to avoid reminiscences, and yet he knew nothing to talk about except the old times.

Mrs. Holladay was inclined to do all in her power to promote his embarrassment, so after a few commonplaces, she sighed : —

"Five years have made a great change in the lives of many of us !" and John began to doubt the wisdom of looking her up. He was made uncomfortable by the tone of her voice, which, as well as her words, suggested introspection and memories. He had an unpleasant recollection of former effects of her demure confidences. Therefore he assumed a somewhat sprightly tone and replied : —

"Yes, five years do make many changes with us, — mostly pleasant ones I fancy."

"Do you think so? Do you really think that life gets pleasanter as one goes on?"

"I think a life that's worth having ought to grow pleasanter, because it ought to grow more profitable."

This rather conventional speech opened Mrs. Fanny's eyes to the fact that, however much the young artist might enjoy her society, she could not make him one of her attachments without the exercise of more adroitness than she had thus far exhibited, so she took another tack.

"Of course, the five years have been full of pleasure to you, Mr. Rantoul?" she said : "I suppose you've come back to us a great artist."

"I don't know how great I am," laughed he ; "but, if I am at all great, I'm singularly unappreciated."

"Yes, that's the way all you talented people talk," she rattled on. "Now Mr. Holladay and I know a man in Washington, — you must really come to us in Washington, next winter, Mr. Rantoul, it's lovely, — but this man, he's very young, writes exquisite verses, but he won't print them, — at least he doesn't, — and he says he hasn't the temerity to become a rival to Byron and Longfellow. It's too absurd, for they are a good deal older than he, you know."

"I'm neither so daring nor so modest as your young poet, for I do paint pictures, — at least I shall paint them, — but I shall not try to rival any one, especially any one of the masters."

Mrs. Fanny was in a charming mood; she was amusing, and John began to find her enjoyable.

"Don't you think painting Madonnas is very hard?"

She asked this question in a tone which indicated that she had herself spent weeks and months wrestling with the lofty subject.

Before John could answer, the versatile creature asked suddenly, and perhaps a little illogically, "Do you think knee-breeches will ever come in?"

John was confused for a moment in endeavoring to comprehend what possible relations could exist between the Madonna and knee-breeches, but he gave his listener a little lecture on the value of a variety of costume, and of color. She caught at the word color, and burst in upon him enthusiastically: —

"Color is indeed everything, is it not? Do you know I just adore reds and soft Persian blues, and

yellows and that sort of thing. I really feel color ; I do so much want to have a little more of it in our domestic life. I want to make our house in Washington an expression of something good, and true, and — and — warm."

"That is a very worthy ambition, and, with your taste and opportunities, I should think you would gratify it ; no doubt you have, though."

"Oh, of course, I've done something ; but the results I have attained are crude and unsatisfying. I suppose what I need is to have some one who is a master take the house in hand. Do you do anything in decoration, Mr. Rantoul ? I wish Mr. Holladay could hear what you say. I want him convinced of the necessity of letting me adorn and beautify the place we live in."

John answered that he did not paint walls, and design furniture, and suggest hangings, with a manner which indicated to Mrs. Holladay that she had made another mistake.

"Why, you surprise me, Mr. Rantoul ; all the artists are going in for decoration. There's more demand for that sort of work, they say, than for pictures ; and that means, I suppose, that they get more money for it."

John winced a little at this coarse materialism, for he never thought of money, except on the first of the month, and he answered, "What you say about my contemporaries is news to me. Before I went away it wasn't the belief of all of them that money is the supreme end of art."

Mrs. Holladay was put on the defensive. She was annoyed that she had permitted herself to take the sordid view, and to offend Rantoul's artistic temperament; but she was more annoyed still that he should have been so quick to take advantage of her slip; therefore she retorted with this question: —

"Are comforts and luxuries, and freedom from cares, which are secured by money, such bad things to have?"

John hated argument on abstract questions, but he hastened to explain that money was well enough in its way, "yet," he continued, "when it has secured one against care and anxiety, and made living comfortable, it has performed its office, and a man who is a true artist cannot make the price of his picture his motive for painting it."

"Proud and soulful poverty!" exclaimed Mrs. Holladay, who had determined to cover her retreat with her cleverness, when she was interrupted by a young woman, who came to remind her of an engagement for a walk. The young woman was very handsome, and altogether attractive. She had a soft voice, a pleasant manner, and large blue eyes; but her chief attraction was her splendid hair, a rich red-gold, in which the yellow and the red seemed to contend for supremacy, the result being so uncertain that no one had yet been able to say which was the more decisive color. John studied this hair; he had never seen anything like it except in pictures.

CHAPTER IV.

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN.

MRS. HOLLADAY was full of excuses for her forgetfulness, and she overwhelmed the new comer with a *mélange* of compliments, self-reproaches, and demonstrations of affection, concluding with, "but I have been so agreeably entertained by an old friend who came suddenly upon me, that I quite forgot how time was slipping by." Then, as she started to trip off to prepare for her walk, she presented Rantoul to Miss Linthicomb.

When she returned, John and Miss Linthicomb were fast getting on good terms. Mrs. Holladay was radiant with happiness, for she had captured Scolly during her absence, and now she proposed that the young men should join Miss Linthicomb and her in their walk.

As they moved down towards the shore, Miss Linthicomb stopped to speak with a woman with whose surpassing beauty John was greatly impressed. She was sitting in the shade of a tree, reading, and, as she looked up and answered, there was that in her eyes, and in her smile, and in her voice which made the artist think of her during all the walk. He learned that her name was Mrs.

Randolph, and that Miss Linthicomb was travelling with her. Not many hours afterwards he was presented to her, and when he went aboard the yacht that evening his day had been so full of pleasure that he was convinced of his wisdom in accepting Scolly's invitation. He had changed his atmosphere completely, and the gloom which had depressed him in Stonecliff and Boston had given way to contentment.

The week at Mt. Desert was delightful. Moreover, John actually accomplished something. His desire to please the people whom he liked was taken advantage of and employed in his own behalf. To know an artist was not a new experience to either Miss Linthicomb or Mrs. Randolph, but to see one at his work, to watch him sketch and make memoranda in color, was new; and besides, they had a natural desire to see their own discoveries of beautiful views immortalized, so they found work for John, while he, glad to give them pleasure, did for amusement what he had intended for his summer's task. Miss Linthicomb permitted him to study the color of her hair. He covered a good many boards with patches of red-gold, that apparently signified nothing, but which were full of meaning to the artist. Once he made a pretty sketch of the wearer of this wonderful hair; and he prepared for his departure regretfully but with a proud consciousness that he could not be upbraided with a wholly ill-spent summer. It is true that his portfolio was not filled

with sketches, but there was some basis for a busy winter,— there were grotesque scenes of marine life, ragged and picturesque fisher boys, pregnant suggestions for future work. He could do much more on the way back ; he would run up to see his mother as soon as he reached Boston, and while at home, he would add to his collection some sketches of life and scenery about the coast and waters of Cape Ann. While he was with Miss Linthicomb, and Mrs. Randolph, their undoubted pleasure in what he accomplished induced a frame of mind which led him to think full employment alone compatible with perfect contentment, and he could not understand how, after this, he should be able to enjoy himself anywhere but at his easel. It is true that the work he did was somewhat more trivial than he hoped to accomplish, but the great achievements would be made in time, and when he felt surer of his own powers.

Mrs. Holladay was in high feather all the week, and she displayed her treasures to the other summer boarders and cottagers with the seemingly triumph of a pretty woman of good breeding who, for the moment, has command of the social situation. The other men of the party were well enough, and she saw that they were properly entertained, but she took good care that the chief prizes should fall to her and to Miss Linthicomb. She chaperoned the younger woman, and while she was only a trifle disturbed by the discovery that Agnes and not she was the principal attraction to both the young men, she

resented the admiration and respect which all the party manifested for Mrs. Randolph. Mrs. Holladay was never wholly comfortable in the presence of the dignified and beautiful woman whom she called her friend. Mrs. Randolph's stateliness never degenerated into stiffness. It is true that most of the men thought her cold, but they recognized in her a kind disposition, and there could be no doubt of her cleverness. She was a constant reproach to frivolous Mrs. Fanny, whose professions of attachment were returned with a graceful courtesy which repelled familiarity.

One day when the young men had taken their friends for a sail, and the happy party was returning home, Mrs. Holladay said to Scolly:—

"Don't you think Miss Linthcomb very beautiful?" The question seemed to throw Scolly into a reflective mood, and he appeared to be in a brown study as he looked long and intently at Agnes, who was seated by the main-mast in such a way that the sunlight coming through a space between the spar and the sail lighted up her hair and face, while all her body was in shadow. It was a striking posture, and Mrs. Holladay's chat was a distant murmur. He heard her, but it required several seconds for the words to assume the proportions of a question which actually required an answer. Then he glanced at Mrs. Holladay, and saw that she was in a divining mood, and that she was putting his feelings to the test.

The two were old friends ; they had known each other almost from childhood, and the most comfortable relations existed between them. Scolly did not answer at once, but asked, in turn : —

“ Who is Miss Linthicomb ? ”

Mrs. Holladay became exuberant.

“ She is the dearest, sweetest, girl I know ; I really do not understand how any man can help falling in love with her. She is not only beautiful, — don’t you think her so ? ”

No answer.

“ But she is good and clever, and all that. Why don’t you pay her more attention ? ”

“ That’s rather a sudden kind of question, isn’t it ? ” answered Scolly, who would have lost caste if he had betrayed any emotion. “ Besides, you must pardon me if I suggest that you haven’t told me who she is. ”

“ You mustn’t be in such a hurry. When one woman is the friend of another woman, — a very rare thing in my experience, — don’t you think it very rare ? ”

“ I don’t know. ” He sighed and spoke resignedly, but assumed an air of patience which indicated that he was willing to wait rather than not have the information he sought.

“ You’re vexed now ; just like a man. When you want anything, you want it at once. ”

Mrs. Fanny pouted and looked so very pretty, that Scolly’s impatience gave way, and he said good-naturedly : “ My dear friend, no one can be vexed with you ; you know I never staid mad more than

an hour or two, when you used to throw me over to dance with Rantoul."

Mrs. Holladay was gratified by this reminiscence of her youthful triumphs, and went on in her dashing way: "Well, as I was telling you, when you interrupted me, Agnes is not rich, and I hope she'll marry some one who can give her the position her beauty and talents entitle her to."

She glanced at Scolly, as she said this; but, perceiving absolutely no expression on his face, she continued: "Her father, Mr. Linthicomb, is a Virginian, but he lives in Washington. I really don't know how rich Mr. Linthicomb is; but he has other children. But what does that matter? We find her agreeable, and she is well placed."

The only reply that Scolly made to all this was in answer to the first question that Mrs. Holladay asked. "Yes," he said, "she is very beautiful;" but he said it in a tone which conveyed no hidden meaning.

Under the main-mast another conversation was going on.

"Do you know that we sail for home to-morrow?" asked John.

"Yes, Mr. Scolly told me so last evening."

"I am very sorry to go; for the week has been the pleasantest I have spent since I came home."

"We shall be very sorry to have you go."

Every incident of the sail had been pleasant, and the day and the visit of the young men were drawing to a close in a purple haze of twilight.

John's and Scolly's good-byes were said late that evening, and they were the last of the party on board. The other men preceded them by an hour or more. As these men lay on the deck smoking, black shadows in the clear moonlight, one of them said : —

"Rantoul's a devilish good fellow."

"And a clever one, too," answered a second.

"Has he any money?" asked the first.

"Never thought to inquire," put in a third.

"Wonder if he'll get any with Miss Linthicomb?" was the suggestion of the first.

"I've always supposed that he had all he wanted, for he lives well, and idles a good deal."

The fourth man had not spoken. His people lived at Waterside, on the Cape, and he knew about the Rantouls. Finally he said : "Rantoul is not rich, though his father, who is a country doctor, and a curmudgeon in the bargain, ought to leave him a comfortable income. I imagine that he don't pan out to John very well just now, and I suppose that it's necessary for him to work. It's a pity he hasn't a more profitable profession, or that he isn't a trifle more steady. A man can't go through the world as Rantoul is going without some day or other getting pretty hard hit by poverty."

There was a short silence as though the three listeners were digesting what they had heard, or laying it away in their memories for future reference.

Then there was a brightening glow on the end of

a cigar, and the smoker followed his vigorous puff with the observation, "I think Miss Linthcomb has got the start of poverty; she has certainly hit Rantoul, and I hope, for her sake, that she has enough money for both of them, for art will never pay for the frocks which that beauty ought to be adorned with."

"Well," said another, "I really can't imagine Rantoul objecting to a wife with a handsome income."

Upon this there was a growl from the fourth man: "You enjoy taking a cheap view of your fellow-mortals, Scott. Rantoul would neither object to a rich wife, nor think of money one way or the other. He'd marry a poor girl, if he remained in love long enough to get her to the church, and would wake up to the necessity of an income, when his best man suggested the propriety of feeing the minister. He's got loads of good stuff in him, but prudence isn't one of his virtues, and unless he goes to work pretty soon, a wife or some one else will have to take care of him. But he isn't much in love with that yellow-haired girl, I fancy."

"That's all right," replied the upbraided Scott, "but I don't take kindly to borrowing geniuses. I wish you joy of your friend, Thompson; it would be heartless to wish you profit."

"If you care to be on speaking terms with genius, Scott," retorted Thompson, "I know no other way for you except to lend it money."

At this there was an outburst of laughter at the

expense of Scott, a fat young broker, who had been invited on the cruise because Scolly was too good-natured to refuse his request for the favor, and who had made himself disagreeably useful by keeping the mess accounts, and by the diligence with which he reminded his companions of the sums he had advanced for the common good.

Scott not having a reply ready, there was an interim of smoke. The moon shone brilliantly on the waters; and the masts, and ropes, and hatchways, cast strong shadows on the deck. As far as the eye could see, there was a wide track of gently moving liquid silver; the waves splashed idly against the sides of the yacht, which was motionless, and the boat fastened astern rose and fell slowly. It was an hour for idle minds, and there was some reaction after the comparatively quick interchange between Thompson and Scott.

Finally a voice came out of the darkness:—

"Why don't you think Rantoul gone on Miss Linthicomb, Thompson?"

"What makes you think he is?" was the response.

"Because he's always with her."

"That's no reason."

"Can't agree with you."

"All the better for me."

"Come, come, old man, don't be cynical; tell the man your reason if you've got one," said another.

"Life's too short to supply all you fellows with reason; but if you must have it, John says good-by

to Miss Linthicomb too easily to be in love with her."

"How do you know how he's saying good-by to her?"

"I don't perhaps, but when we left the hotel, Rantoul was with Mrs. Randolph, and both were resignedly, if not contentedly, listening to Mrs. Holladay enlarge on what she calls her "aspirations" about her Washington house, while Scolly was with Miss Agnes in the darkest corner of the piazza."

Just then the sound of oars told the group that John and Scolly were coming off to the yacht. There was a murmur of voices — no, it was of a single voice. John was going into an expansive rhapsody on half tones, white moonlight, and strong shadows. Scolly was silent.

"He can't cut in anywhere, when Rantoul's got the floor," said the revived Scott.

"Doesn't want to," said Thompson.

When the company had gone below, the man on watch began to moralize.

"Seems to me," said he to himself and his pipe, "there's a lot of mist'ry 'bout this high-toned love makin'. I vum, when a Cape Cod boy sparks a Cape Cod gal, there aint on mistake about the meanin' uv it. Ef the gal's willin' the hull town knows it; and ef two fellows are arter her the hull town knows that, tew. No one boat 'd be big enough for two Cape Cod boys that's in love with the same gal, you ken bet."

CHAPTER V.

SHOWS THE FAMILY SKELETON.

THE Main street of Stonecliff had its usual crowd of village folk, — fishermen, boatmen, and city boarders, one hot August evening, and the centre of attraction was the post-office. It seems strange that so many people should go after unexpected mail matter, until the fact is appreciated that going for possible letters furnishes a pretext for a walk and a probable gossip. The lively people who resorted to the village news exchange were getting their day's pleasure in their rather awkward way; the youth of both sexes were flirting in that delicious rural manner in which the young woman and the young man each betrays a strong anxiety lest the other shall not recognize her or his kind intentions; the tarry fish-catchers were growling out the accustomed discontent at the thinning of the cod and mackerel; the few mill hands whom the single factory sustained were discussing politics; the younger business men were thrusting sharp witticisms into each other; and the elders were gravely conversing about nothing. Through this laughing, chatting, crowd moved Dr. Rantoul. He was greeted respectfully, but not cordially. In return he nodded silently to three

or four of the men, and shook hands with the president of the village bank. He stopped to speak to one person only ; it was a cripple whom John had once saved from drowning. Simeon Ballard was the local news-gatherer, quick with his pen, but thriftless. He not only chronicled the events that happened in Stonecliff, but he had published a book about the place, and was looked up to by some, and was popular with all. When an old resident whose life had been passed in handling fish-nets and their accompaniments desired to ventilate himself in the columns of the county paper, he went to Simeon Ballard, "for his grammar." The doctor addressed Simeon gruffly.

"I haint seen that money yet, Sim."

The cripple began an explanation about what he called his "bad luck," promising, as he had promised many times before, that he would certainly see the doctor paid among the first of his creditors, when the old man snapped out : —

"Well, I want ye to understan', Sim Ballard, that I've waited on ye long enough, and I'm out o' patience. Ef there was any use to take the law on ye I'd 'a' done it months ago ; but I tell ye you'd better pay me, or it'll be the wuss for ye. I can't afford to be doctorin' folks for nothin', and I won't. Ef ye must have sick turns and can't afford to pay doctor's bills why don't ye go onto the town ?"

Saying these ungracious words the doctor moved away. The cripple's pale face flushed and his eyes

flashed. He clutched his cane nervously, and his whole appearance betrayed rage and shame. His tormentor could not have insulted him more cruelly, for Ballard came of some of the best stock in town, and, no matter how impecunious a native New Englander may be, the suggestion to him of the poor-house is almost equivalent to a threat of the jail.

When the doctor was on his way out of the post-office he was stopped by a man about sixty years old. This man had a professional look and wore professional clothes. He was small, smooth-faced, and he had quick, rather furtive, black eyes. Altogether he would have been taken for what he was, — a shrewd country lawyer. The doctor did not appear to relish this detention. But the lawyer smiled; he smiled whenever he addressed any one, although the smile could not be called cordial; it expressed a desire to seem pleased rather than pleasure. It was the habitual smile of a man who deprecated the exhibition of ill-will.

"Ah! good evenin', doctor, good evenin'," said the lawyer.

"Good evenin'," answered the doctor, stopping for a moment because the other held out his hand to him, but in an attitude intended to indicate that the doctor had very few minutes to waste in desultory conversation in the village post-office.

The lawyer was evidently determined to have a talk with the doctor, and he therefore took no notice of the hint to be brief.

"Wait a minute, Rantoul," he said, "I want to tell ye somethin'."

"Well, be quick, Basswood, for I'm hurried."

"It's occurred to me that you ought to arrange about Mary Pickerin's property," said the lawyer.

"What's Mary Pickerin's property to you, I'd like to know?" The doctor was angry, and his voice was louder, probably, than he thought, for the name of Mary Pickering attracted the attention of Simeon Ballard, who pricked up his news-gathering ears.

Mary Pickering was the doctor's niece, the only child of his only sister. The mother died when the girl was born, and the father, Isaac Pickering, followed his wife in a year, leaving his daughter a comfortable fortune, and Dr. Rantoul, the only relation she had in the world, as guardian and trustee. A year later Dr. Rantoul was embarrassed, needing money to save him from a fall which would have been very serious to him. Having been "forehanded," he could not entertain the thought of the loss of fortune. He had, therefore, no hesitation in making use of the money which had been intrusted to him by his dead brother-in-law, and very soon he saw signs that, with its aid, he would grow richer than he had ever been. At first, he thought that he would simply retain as his own, in addition to a sum equal to that which Mary's fortune had saved, the increase beyond what he termed "fair interest," meaning, thereby, the low rate allowed by the savings-bank. But he was a greedy man, and soon

longed for the whole, so that it was not many months before he came to regard Mary as standing in the way of his interests, and he determined to get her out of his sight. The end of his reflections on the matter was an announcement that he had found some distant connections of the child's, in the mountains of North Carolina, and that he would take her to them, because, he explained, she came of a short-lived race; and she would thrive in a warmer climate, and perhaps, in more favorable surroundings, grow to womanhood.

Mrs. Rantoul suspected that the doctor had some other and hidden reason for taking the child away from Stonecliff; but she said nothing in opposition. When Mary was three years old the doctor took her from the village, and when he returned alone he announced to his wife that the girl had been put into good hands, and that the Strands, the people with whom he had left her, were well-to-do planters. During the first year the doctor received occasional letters from the South. They came in coarse envelopes, soiled with finger marks, and the directions on them were evidently written by a person to whom correspondence was not habitual. Mrs. Rantoul never read these letters, but, in answer to her inquiries, the doctor told her that Mary was alive, and better than she would have been, had she remained at home.

Then the war came, and soon the doctor received no more letters. Four years of the noise and confu-

sion of civil strife, pretty nearly obliterated Mary Pickering from the memories of the people of Stone-cliff; but one man had a reason for keeping alive the recollection of the child. That man was Lawyer Basswood, a large part of whose business it was to understand and make available the weaknesses of his fellow towns-people. Basswood knew that the doctor had speculated with Mary's fortune, and he had ascertained that the girl was alive when regular communication between the two sections of the country ceased with the outbreak of the war. How he acquired this knowledge, the doctor never discovered, for Basswood had mysterious methods of securing a hold on men with bank accounts. The lawyer took occasion to let the doctor know of his information, and thereafter, Rantoul's name was on the backs of many of his promissory notes, and Rantoul's money paid some of them.

When the war ended the doctor made up his mind to take no steps to find Mary Pickering. He argued that if she were alive, and the people who had her in charge were dead, the girl would be no worse off than many thousands of other girls; in other words, that she might, as well as most of the rest of the world, make her own way in it. At any rate, he thought that he might safely wait for a letter from the Strands before making any effort to find her. A year or so passed, and no letter came. The doctor was beginning to look upon the fortune as his own. He even became brave enough to refuse to

sign a note with Basswood, whereupon that jurist showed him a letter, received before the war, from a lawyer who lived in a village near the home of the Strands, and with whom Basswood corresponded. Basswood had discovered the locality in a very simple way. Being a political ally of the postmaster, he was often a visitor in the back room of the office, and, on one occasion, when the mail was distributing, he examined one of the coarse envelopes in which Strand wrapped his demands for money, and the postmark gave him the information which he sought.

"Does the doctor get many of these?" he asked his official friend, as he held up the letter.

"'Bout one a month, or thereabouts, I guess."

"Does he answer them?"

"Reg'larly."

"What's the name?"

"Strand, if I don't misrecollect."

"Humph!" mused Basswood, and he stood for a moment in a thoughtful attitude, his chin resting between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. He started to go slowly out of the room, but now the postmaster's silence, long officially maintained, gave way before his newly aroused curiosity.

"I guess the letters come from the folks that's takin' care o' Mary," he suggested.

"Perhaps," answered the lawyer, still moving on.

"I suppose you don't know nothin' about 'em, do you?" asked the postmaster.

"Never heard tell on 'em."

"Didn't know that young Pickerin' had any Southern relations?"

"No."

"Well, it's mighty cur'us," said the postmaster.

Basswood had reached the door by this time, and passed out with a "Good-evenin'."

He looked up the place in a publication devoted to giving a list of collection agencies, and found that a classmate practised law in the village. The place was called Summit, and was situated in the mountains of North Carolina. In a few days he learned that the Strands were poor whites; that they lived in a cabin in the mountains; that they had been always in the depths of destitution until now, when they had begun to spend money as though a small inheritance had come to them. Basswood's correspondent did not know that the addition to their narrow income improved their methods of living, because the head of the house was an idle, worthless, drunkard, to whom more money simply meant more liquor. The man's family consisted of a boy of about ten years old, and of a girl younger than the boy, and who was reported to have been left with the Strands some months before by a stranger who apparently came from the North.

The letter was an elaborate answer of Basswood's equally elaborate inquiries, and closed with an offer from the writer to do anything in his power to attend to what business Basswood might have with the Strands, although it was delicately sug-

gested that, if the business were in the nature of a claim, it might be better abandoned than prosecuted.

It was an ugly letter, on the whole, for Dr. Rantoul to read. He saw that he was cornered, for, although some years had passed since it was written, he believed that Stonecliff would buzz with gossip if it should be made public that he had left his sister's child in care of a drunken Southern mountaineer, and that his standing as a church-member and a citizen would be gone. He saw no way of escape from Basswood's clutches. If he had gone South when the war broke out, or, even later, when it ended, to bring the girl back, he might have withstood this letter, which Basswood had treasured up for years to produce whenever the doctor might attempt to escape him. But now he was in the toils, and his usual shrewdness deserted him. He was weak enough to yield to his first impulse, and to attempt to bargain with the lawyer. If he had been given the original paper he would have destroyed it and dared the lawyer to oppose his own shaky reputation against the word of the leading citizen of the town. But the lawyer was not a fool, and he smiled as he saw the look of disappointment creep over the doctor's angry face when he read the word "Copy," at the top of the sheet of paper.

The doctor folded up the paper slowly, and taking off his spectacles, carefully put them in their case, and the case into his waistcoat pocket. He did not look at the lawyer. Perhaps he felt the air

of triumph with which that industrious person bustled about the office, chuckling as he pretended to busy himself in arranging his books and papers.

"Well?" said the doctor.

"'Tisn't a very pretty document, is it, doctor?"
And the chuckle became more audible.

The doctor at first denied the truth of the statements made in the letter, but Basswood did not permit him to continue in that direction, and then the doctor wanted to buy the paper. The lawyer would not part with it on any terms, and locking it up in his safe said:—

"I calc'late that that's as valuable a piece of property as I'm seized on, doctor."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SKELETON BECOMES A FIXTURE.

THE result was that the doctor again indorsed and paid Basswood's notes, but just before John's return from Europe, his bonds becoming unbearable, he had gone South to find out, if possible, what had become of Mary. He determined that if she still lived it would be better to pay back her property with the "fair interest," than to go on at the beck and call of the smooth-faced villain who robbed his purse, and, worse than all, trampled on his ugly pride. He hoped in the bottom of his heart, but almost if not quite unconsciously, that he should hear of the girl's death. His visit to the South resulted in the discovery that Strand had taken to bushwhacking at the beginning of the war, and that he had been killed. Mrs. Strand had moved away from the place, having linked her fortunes with a second husband. Whether the two children had gone with her the doctor could not ascertain; where she then was no one knew. A freedman occupied the cabin where the Strands had once lived, and he announced pompously: —

"I nebber take no notice, boss, of de goin's and comin's and belongin's of po' white trash. Dese

yer Strands wan't no 'count, and wedder dey chillun or not, I du'no."

The doctor thoroughly satisfied himself that the Strands could not be traced, and so he returned home, a little troubled by the consciousness that he had been guilty of something which looked very like a crime, but also congratulating himself that he was freed from Basswood, for he determined that he would face down that letter if the lawyer ever again threatened him with it. He caused the report to be spread abroad that he had long known of Mary's disappearance; that he had kept silent about it because he had cherished the hope that she might yet be found; and that his recent journey to the South had been undertaken because he had discovered what he imagined might turn out to be a clue "to the poor girl's whereabouts." He sadly professed, however, that while his journey had been unsuccessful in one view, in another it had not been a failure, for he had obtained evidence which satisfied him that Mary was dead.

It was not long before the doctor convinced himself that he had not been guilty of anything very bad. It was easy enough for him to do this, because he had committed no offence against the statutes or the common law. When he felt that he had himself well in hand, and that the belief in Mary's death ought to have become general in the community, he once more rebelled against Basswood's dominion. The lawyer very soon saw that nothing could be accom-

plished by the use of the letter. He might indeed reawaken the old suspicion against the doctor, but that would not help him pecuniarily ; and therefore it would be necessary to resort to something else. On this evening he had completed his plan of action, and was ready to carry it into effect.

To the doctor's angry interrogatory, "What's Mary Pickering's property to you?" Basswood simply answered : —

"You'd better come to my office ; this aint no place to talk business."

The two moved on as they talked, and their last words were spoken under the shadow of one of the arched doorways of the building. They were within a few feet of Ballard, who eagerly drank in all the two men said, chiefly because his trained instinct for gossip told him that an "item" might be the outcome of this talk in the lawyer's office. Ballard knew generally that the doctor had not administered his niece's estate, but he recollected what he had listened to only because his knowledge might secure an early paragraph of probate court news. The doctor and the lawyer walked away together. They went along the street silently, for the doctor had made up his mind to stand on the defensive, while the lawyer had not determined how to begin. Basswood moved quickly — that he always did — with short steps ; the doctor lumbered heavily at his side. The doctor's eyes were bent on the ground, and his face wore a thoughtful look ; Basswood's

face was wreathed in smiles, but it was apparent that he was very nervous, and that he dreaded the interview, about to take place, only less than the doctor. There was an air of cringing timidity about him which showed plainly enough that he depended on his cunning rather than on his courage, and that he must have a clear case against the doctor if he had any intention of bearding that strong old man.

When the two men came to a yellow brick building they went into a door-way which looked like a large hole in the wall. The store on the first floor was devoted to the sale of ready-made clothing; over this was Basswood's office. Outside the hole in the wall hung a frame filled with rural pictures, and the legend, "Photographer," indicated that art did all in its power to relieve the sadness of this rickety warehouse of shoddy and jurisprudence.

Basswood climbed the narrow, dark stair-way, and the doctor followed him. The lawyer trotted into his outer room, still smiling, and made himself unnecessarily busy with some blank papers that were lying about. The two rooms were ill-lighted apartments, and they were uncarpeted. A large round table, an old-fashioned desk or so, a number of law books in red pine cases, and a standing desk made up the furniture. There was wanting the genial air of most country law offices, — an air suggestive of much leisure, large tobacco consumption, rather liberal stories, more talk and checkers than work. There were dark corners that seemed fit hiding-

places for evil deeds. The silence, the fading light, the gloomy tables, and chairs, and bookcases, the stealthy Basswood himself, gave the doctor the uncomfortable feeling that he was in the very home of surreption. He was a determined man, however, and he seated himself on one of the Windsor-chairs with the air of one who is prepared for the worst.

Basswood was long in beginning. He first trotted to a round table, and fumbled over some pieces of paper: then he went through a similar performance at the standing desk; then he opened the safe; then shut it. The doctor grew impatient at last, and said: —

"Basswood, ef you're after anythin' let me know it."

"Yes, yes, yes," quickly and softly responded the lawyer. He had a curious habit of repeating his words, very rapidly, as though their accumulation compensated for their lack of character.

He continued, still moving about the rooms, and from one room to the other: "You've got to be a pretty rich man, Rantoul, pretty rich. He-he-he!"

The doctor made no reply; and the lawyer, brushing up his hair with his hand, seated himself near the doctor, and became quiet.

Then after a pause, he went on: "You're a good manager, good manager, good manager. Lucky Mary Pickerin' had to go south for her health, was'nt it? He-he-he!"

"I don't understan' what you're drivin' at," said the doctor, who had assumed his air of gravest dig-

nity. "Mary's dead, and 't seems to me that that's evidence that she was ailin', jes 's I said she was."

"Oh! I'm sayin' nothin' to the contrary, doctor, I assure you," and there was less of a chuckle now, and a little more evidence of nervous trepidation.

"No, you never do *say* nothin'," answered the doctor. "It's your way to insinuate; and, darn it all!" — the doctor was fast losing his temper, — "your cussed snickerin' makes me mad."

"Now, really, really, really, doctor, you mustn't use such language here; I can't allow it." The lawyer's spasmodic clutch after dignity made him somewhat resemble a ruffled hen. The doctor was silent; it was evident that he despised the man under whose power he had been for many years.

Basswood soon gained courage to say: —

"Rantoul, why don't ye administer on Mary's estate!"

At this question the doctor looked the lawyer squarely in the eye. There was no smile now on that round countenance. Basswood was in earnest, and having at last, after an infinite amount of sneaking, bolted into the subject, he was both more comfortable and more dignified. What most attracted the doctor's attention was a cunning gleam in Basswood's eyes.

"I suppose ye want to make a dollar or two," said the doctor.

"Don't mind ef I do," said the lawyer; "but 't seems to me that 'taint business-like to hev all that

prop'ty o' yourn standin' in the name of a dead girl."

"In the first place," replied the doctor, "'taint all hern."

"There's no use arguin' that with me, Rantoul. I know pretty well what's hern and what's yourn."

"Yes, you know pretty well what's everybody's business except your own."

"Neither is that the point; why aint ye taken out letters on that girl's property?"

"That's none o' your durned business." The lawyer arose at this, but not because he was angry. He never showed anger, unless it paid, and this was the very last occasion for its exhibition. He trotted about his rooms again, pottered with his papers, and apparently fished in his mind for the best means of taking advantage of the doctor's passion.

"You can't prevent me from doin' ye a good turn, Rantoul," he said at last, "by gettin' mad. I know ye too well to let ye bother me in that way."

"S'pose you shet up your palaverin', and tell me jes' what's your scheme," said the doctor.

"You're doin' me great injustice, great injustice, great injustice, doctor; really you be."

"Basswood, you're a damned aggravatin' hypocrite!" The doctor had permitted his passion to get the better of his religion.

The lawyer drew up his rather unimportant figure to its inconsiderable height, and answered this outburst by saying:—

"Doctor Rantoul, ef you don't want to know what I know this interview might as well terminate. It's unpleasant, very unpleasant, very unpleasant."

Now the doctor did want to discover what new thing Basswood knew, or what new plan he had; while Basswood's desire was to discover if Rantoul feared any possible revelation. The doctor, therefore, changed his humor, and said:—

"Now, see here, Basswood, ef you've got anythin' to say, say it. I hate dodgin' round a point, when the straight path to it is the shortest way."

"I'm sure I'm not partic'lar 'bout talkin', and I guess you're right. It aint none of my business, any way."

Saying this, the lawyer brushed up his hair with his hands, put on his hat, and gave every indication of being about to quit the office.

The doctor was nonplussed. He did not want to reveal his anxiety to hear what Basswood had to say, and yet he was determined not to quit the lawyer's presence without having it out with his tormentor.

After a moment's reflection, he blurted out:—

"Business is business, and ef ye want anythin' let's know the hull story."

The cunning gleam became brighter at once. The doctor had revealed to the lawyer that there was something to be anxious about. So Basswood took off his hat, resumed his seat, and said:—

"Well, ef ye're goin' to be reasonable, I'll tell ye somethin' for your own good. Folks about here are talkin' a good deal about you and Mary Pickerin'."

"They be, be they? Well, what do they say?"

The doctor controlled his voice admirably, but his face and his manner betrayed anxiety.

"They say that ef you was sure that the girl was dead, you'd a made that property yourn in law quicker'n you could say Jack Robinson."

The doctor started perceptibly on hearing this. He continued, however, to try to control himself, although he was evidently nervous, when he answered, with a forced laugh: —

"That's as idle a tale as Stonecliff fools ever indulged in. It aint so long sence I found out that Mary was dead."

"It's nigh onto six months," said the lawyer.

"I s'pose that is a long time to keep you out o' your fee for gettin' out letters for me," sneered the doctor.

"Ef ye think that ye'll get any information out of me by insultin' me you're mistaken, mistaken." The lawyer appeared ruffled, but he was not; he desired to compel the doctor to give further evidence of anxiety.

"Ye're mighty techy, seems to me," was the growled-out response. "S'pose these blabbin' old women do say so, what of it?"

"They say more," quietly replied the lawyer.

"More, eh! Well, damn 'em, what more is it?" The doctor was now intensely excited, and Basswood was proportionately gratified.

"They say they don't believe she's dead."

"Blast the fools ! I know she's dead," shouted the doctor.

"Ef you can take your oath to that you'd better do it," suggested the lawyer.

The doctor was much disturbed by this proposition. It involved the commission of a statutory offence, and that was something he had hoped to be able to avoid. He was silent for a long time, and Basswood permitted him to think on without interruption. The conclusion of the doctor's reflections was inevitable. He must quiet the gossips, and he must prevent inquiry as to Mary's fate.

"Well," said he at length, "I s'pose I've got to. Ye can make out the papers whenever ye like."

The lawyer chuckled when he heard this, and he said, as he rubbed his hands, and once more trotted about his office and rearranged the troublesome blank pieces of paper : —

"I thought ye'd be reasonable in the end, Rantoul. There's nothin' like bein' reasonable in business matters ; nothin' like it, nothin' like it, nothin' like it. But what's your evidence that the girl's dead?"

The cunning gleam reappeared when Basswood saw that the doctor was again disturbed. Then he made a suggestion in the form of an inquiry : —

"Can't ye swear that some one who knows about it told ye so?" he asked.

The doctor reflected, and, swallowing his conscience, replied : —

"Yes, I can. The black man who lives in the Strands' house told me so."

"What's his name?" Basswood spoke carelessly, but a closer observer than the doctor was just then capable of being could have seen his hand tremble with eagerness as he prepared to note the name. The doctor gave it to him, and Basswood made the necessary memoranda. In a few days the papers were prepared, the doctor made the affidavit, and Mary Pickering's estate was ready to be legally swallowed by her uncle and trustee.

CHAPTER VII.

CONTAINS A LITTLE LOVE AND A SURRENDER.

"I REALLY can't understand why making a house beautiful by putting color on the walls is not as worthy employment as painting pictures for its decoration."

"My dear friend, I don't suppose you can. For a man of your capacity you have an extraordinarily slight appreciation of the fancies and feelings of an artist."

"What I have no appreciation for, Rantoul, is the folly of throwing away a chance to make more money in three months than you will earn from your pictures in three years."

The two men were in John's room. There was a comfortable disorder there now, for its occupant had been at work in it for two months. He and Scolly had just returned from dining with Mrs. Holladay, who was on the point of departure for Washington. She had been in Boston for a month or more, and had made excellent use of John's leisure and good nature. Many were the rich stuffs and hangings and striking pieces of furniture which she had selected for her new house at the capital, after John had pointed out their merits. She had even secured

from him a suggestion about the treatment of her walls, and a drawing or two for tables and chairs.

The pretty woman, having determined to reign in society, had persuaded her husband to build a house in Washington. She was possessed of a good deal of social talent, and even the rented house, which she occupied while her own was building, was very popular. When she met Rantoul, at Mt. Desert, she conceived the idea of securing him as an attraction for the winter, recognizing in him qualities which might render him a very desirable addition to her retinue. He looked and talked well, and she thought, if he happened to accomplish something, he might turn out a star. The problem was, how to make a winter at the capital possible for him. Mrs. Fanny was a shrewd worldling, and she never took a step hastily.

She was always pretty sure of the consequences of her act before she performed it. John was a familiar subject to her. She knew him thoroughly, — his weaknesses as well as his strength. At first she had thought of inviting him to visit her, but a prudent and carefully directed inquiry of Scolly revealed to her that John ought not to give any time to idling; that he ought to be at work for the sake both of his reputation and of his pocket. Mrs. Holladay did not want to be troubled by the constant presence of a man who was neglecting his duty, and she knew that John would accept any invitation

which promised him pleasure. He might resist at first, but he would yield in the end.

The taste which he displayed in selecting articles for the adornment of her house suggested that she might secure his services as a decorator. John had much disrelish, however, for this kind of work, and was put out with what he considered the surrender of some of his old friends to Mammon. The abandonment of creative work for beautifying the walls and ceilings of houses appeared to him to be the depth of sordidness. He had once been greatly shocked by what seemed the insincerity and essential dishonesty of the whole movement on finding a man with real ability painting a fine old Italian marble mantel in imitation of wood.

"Do you think this sort of humbug worthy of you?" he asked impatiently.

The other man laughed as he replied: "I tried to persuade the owner that his mantel ought to stand; but, first, he insisted on a wooden one, and I compromised with him by spoiling this with paint. But he's a Philistine, and, by George! we might as well have his money. What's the use of being too fine with them; make them pay, hang 'em, make them pay; and, as long as they're going to pay, I might as well have their money as another man."

John was not yet prepared to give up his ideal. It was very fine, and he was always intending to make a beginning towards attaining it. Sometimes his intention was very strong and urged him on to

work vigorously ; but most of the time it was buried under a good-natured indolence. Scolly strongly desired that his friend should undertake Mrs. Holladay's work. He wanted him not only to succeed in making reputation, but to prosper. The easy circumstances in which he himself had always been were so thoroughly enjoyable that he had little patience with a man who would deliberately prefer the pursuit of an ideal, to the doing of a simple task which would bring him material comforts.

There was a little pause after Scolly's last remark, and the two men looked into the glowing fire, and silently smoked their pipes. Finally Scolly went on :—

"You know you want to go to Washington, old man."

"Yes, I do, very much." There was a shade of feeling in the tone in which the answer was given. There was a vision of the contentment and enthusiasm he had felt at Mt. Desert. Suddenly, as if it occurred to him that his voice might have expressed too much, he started out of his reverie, and said carelessly, "Yes, I should like to see the place ; I've never been there, you know."

"Besides, you know some pleasant people there," added Scolly.

"I wonder if Agnes Linthicomb and Mrs. Randolph are to be there this winter?" mused John.

"I understand they are," was the response. "You would get a lot of good by seeing a good deal of Miss Linthicomb."

"Do you think so?"

There was something in the indifference with which this answer was given that apparently gave Scolly pleasure.

"Why, man," he said, "you don't appreciate the wonderful advantages of that woman's friendship."

"Well, Scolly, to tell the truth I suppose you are right. But Mrs. Randolph always seemed to me the better of the two; she was certainly the more beautiful."

"I can't agree with you, Rantoul, I" —

"Don't go on, my dear boy." Saying this John rose and, walking with long strides up and down his room, continued: "I'm not blind; you're in love with Agnes Linthicomb, and I am glad of it. I hope she'll love you, for you're worthy of her."

Pleasure was expressed in every one of Scolly's features on hearing this rather vehement speech of John's, although the tone of the reply was cold.

"Common opinion didn't select me for Miss Linthicomb's victim, Rantoul."

With a pleasant laugh, John answered: —

"But I've no respect for common opinion. I flatter myself that mine is an uncommon opinion, and uncommonly near the truth."

"I may not be able to form a judgment on such subjects, but I certainly agreed with the rest."

There was formality in Scolly's voice, but it was apparent that John's words gave him pleasure.

"Scolly, I suppose you must hold yourself in and

keep your secrets to yourself; if you didn't you would surrender one of the principal features of your birthright."

Scolly muttered something about a proper reserve, but John went on: —

"I'm different, you know: all I think and feel comes bubbling out of me. I know my frankness is a weakness, and I am properly ashamed of it. But, my friend, however much I may like Miss Linthcomb — and it is very much — I'm not in love with her."

Scolly's face lighted up with joy, and he started as if to make confession of his amiable weakness, but he thought better of it, and sank back again in his chair. Looking up at a picture on the wall, he broke out suddenly: —

"Whose portrait is that, John?"

"My aunt's."

"Did you ever see such a likeness?"

"To whom, pray?"

"Miss Linthcomb. Don't you see that the woman in this picture has precisely the same hair?"

John glanced carelessly at the portrait, and answered: —

"Yes; I have always known that resemblance, and often marvelled at it; but I've noticed no other."

Scolly did see other resemblances, and gratified himself by keeping his eyes fixed on the portrait.

John was evidently interested in his own affairs,

for he continued to pace up and down the apartment in silence.

At last Scolly returned to the Washington project and said :—

"John, do as Mrs. Holladay suggests. You are doing nothing here. You permit anything to distract you. When you are not talking you are in the dumps about your debts, and it's about time for you to do something in the world. Take to this business of beautifying the home of the American millionaire. Satisfy the aspirations of his wife. Put some color on their walls, and some tone into their lives."

"The devil take the millionaire and his wife, and all Philistines!" broke in Rantoul. "I'm not a house-painter."

"You're not a very good-mannered anything, my friend."

"I beg your pardon, dear old boy, but I'm in a bad mood to-night."

"You've been in a bad mood for two months, Rantoul; that's one reason why I thought you in love."

"No," answered John, "you must get another reason for my bad manners. But I confess I'm unsettled, and that I can't work as I thought I would when I came home from our cruise."

When the two men parted that night John told Scolly that he had not fully determined to refuse Mrs. Holladay's invitation. That, he announced, was the worst of it. He had not the courage to turn

his back sharply and without hesitation on the pleasures held out so alluringly to him. To add to his embarrassment, Scolly promised that he would accompany him if he went, and would spend the winter with him. This was a sudden determination of Scolly's, who was one of those fortunate individuals who possess the world, and who are at liberty to dwell wherever their fancy may call them. This time his mind was made up after hearing that John was not in love with Agnes Linthicomb.

John did not resolve to go to Washington for some time, so that winter had begun when he reached the capital. In the mean time he paid a visit to his mother at Stonecliff, and he found that she was greatly annoyed by gossips of the town, whose tongues had been set to wagging by the probate proceedings, by means of which Dr. Rantoul was about to acquire title to the property he had practically owned for twenty years.

"John," she said to her son, "Mary Pickering haunts me. I do not know why, but it seems to me that something dreadful is coming out of this business."

"Why, my dear mother, Mary's dead, and how can anything more dreadful than that happen?"

John was ten years old when Mary was taken away to the South, and his recollection of her was very indistinct. He had a dim memory of a pretty child of whom he was very fond, but he could not recall much beyond the fact of her existence. His

mother's fearful premonitions seemed to him womanly superstitions born of her surroundings, and he brushed them away rather roughly. He hated mystery and trouble, and so he hastened back into the more roseate life of the city as soon as possible.

When he arrived there the drift toward Washington had become so strong that he recognized the impossibility of stemming the tide, and he wrote a note to Mrs. Holladay announcing his surrender to decorative art, and accepting what he now called her "kind offer."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AGAIN.

AFTER fairly establishing himself at the capital John worked diligently. He found his task not disagreeable, and he was soon aroused to a placid interest in it.

Mrs. Holladay made much of the two young men, who found themselves recognized features in the pleasantest social life of the country. Miss Linthcomb and Mrs. Holladay were a good deal together, at least Mrs. Holladay often had the younger woman with her, although John suspected that the apparent intimacy was of Mrs. Fanny's forcing. One day Miss Linthcomb said to John : —

"I used to think, last summer, that you were very fond of Mrs. Randolph."

"So I was ; and so I am still."

"And yet you haven't called on her."

"No ; and I really don't understand why I haven't."

"It is a little strange, I must confess." Miss Linthcomb said this in a tone which indicated that the phrase "It is a little strange" very faintly described John's singular conduct.

To tell the truth the young man had been idly thinking about Mrs. Randolph and wondering if he

had best pursue the pleasant acquaintance which he had made at Mt. Desert. Miss Linthicomb's suggestion, and her very evident opinion of his unpardonable indifference rekindled a desire that dozed if it did not slumber, and awakened a process of reasoning through which he had gone on first seeing Mrs. Randolph in Washington. He had placed Mrs. Randolph on a very high pedestal, and she had become so much an ideal to him that he desired to do nothing or know nothing which might disturb his image of her, or lead to the discovery that she was in any degree less than he had thought her. He knew nothing of her domestic relations; he had never met Mr. Randolph. Here then were new surroundings which might prove disturbing, and, without precisely formulating his feelings, he had concluded that his present relations with her were probably more comfortable than any that were closer could be. He met her in other people's houses, where he was brought in contact only with her own personality, and this was so thoroughly admirable and satisfactory that he dreaded putting her to a new test. Scolly had called, and had dined with the Randolphs, and he was full of enthusiasm for Mrs. Randolph's beauty, renewing his verdict however as to her coldness.

John went to see her very soon after the short conversation with Miss Linthicomb, and he was lucky enough to find her alone. She was seated at a table on which there was a lamp, and the light raying out made a shining background for her head. The artist

thought he had never seen anything so beautiful, and he stood looking at the picture for a moment before Mrs. Randolph glanced up and saw him.

She was in a pleasant mood and rallied him on his inconstancy. To his expressions of pleasure at seeing her again she playfully said : —

"And yet you have been in Washington more than two weeks and you have not taken the trouble to call on me."

John could make only a stammering reply about the exacting demands of his work, and was evidently in so much trouble over his neglect that the kind woman, who could not be malicious even in jest, said, "I'll forgive you, if you will promise not to desert me again. I am very exacting with my friends, and I do not easily overlook such offences as you have committed."

When she implied that he might be numbered among her friends she looked at him in a way which made him feel that she meant all she said, and John was at once comfortably at home. He suspected that he might, at no distant day, be on a familiar footing with this friend, and he knew that if she would permit him to come and go as he chose, her companionship would be of great comfort to him.

The conversation was largely devoted to the memories of the pleasant week of the last summer; and there was a little philosophy and a little literature. Mrs. Randolph liked to talk about her books, and the interest she took in John was based largely on

the similarity of their tastes. Down on the coast of Maine, six months before, they had found that they were very interesting to each other, and now that they had come together again they had the same feeling of mutual suitableness. If a third person had told either of them that they were dangerously congenial, and that, through intimacy, they might drift too close to one another, neither Mrs. Randolph nor John would have admitted the risk. So far as John understood his sentiments towards this beautiful woman, it was wholly one of admiration; he admired her beauty, the sweetness of her voice, the gentleness and kindness of her disposition, and the naturalness of her manner. So far as Mrs. Randolph was concerned, she found John worthy of her friendship; he was intelligent, accomplished, honorable, and gave her an intellectual stimulus which was generally lacking in her life, and especially in her domestic life. She promised herself great pleasure and some profit from often seeing this clever man whose talk made so agreeable a break in the routine of existence. She was a proud woman, too, and very ambitious; and, while she was brave, she would not have tolerated a suspicion that she might, by any possibility, approach the edge of a scandal, not wholly from deference to the opinion of the world, but from regard to her own fair name.

There was no thought of sentiment or feeling, as they contentedly spent this long evening together. They were glad that an additional pleasure had been

bestowed upon them, and that was all. Before John went away he had an opportunity of seeing Mr. Randolph, who had been dining out with some men and reached home just as John was taking his departure.

He was a handsome blond man, with a cordial manner, and it was evident, as he and Mrs. Randolph united in urging John to make himself at home in their house, that there existed the kindest relations between the man and wife.

The day before John would have been content with a mere acquaintance with Mrs. Randolph. This was not because he did not value her friendship; Mrs. Randolph as a friend had never occurred to him; but now the possibility of an intimacy, by reason of the intellectual sympathy between them, gave him a sense of great gladness. It seemed to him that he had seen deep into this fair woman's soul on this pleasant evening, and he recognized an elevation and purity of which he had only dreamed before. He grew more self-respectful, and, as days went by, and he saw more and more of her, he was filled with a desire to accomplish something worthy of such a friendship, which, he fancied, had placed him on a perilous height. At times he was made very unhappy by the fear lest he might be found too little for the esteem with which Mrs. Randolph appeared to regard him. There were times, too, when he asked himself if he were falling in love with her; but he very easily convinced himself that this could

not be love. He had no such sentiments, for example, as those which made the world alternately bright and dark when he was devoted to Miss Stockbridge, now Mrs. Holladay, and his patron. Besides, he agreed willingly with Scolly that Mrs. Randolph was cold; meaning thereby that her intellect and will mastered her affections. No; to John it seemed that his feeling for Mrs. Randolph was one of wholesome, humble, worship and admiration. There was nothing else, and the indulgence of this was good for him.

During these days of happiness John painted with great energy. A sudden inspiration had been given him. He dashed into his task with a spirit that fired his assistants. He even mounted the scaffolding and gave his men practical lessons in carrying out his designs. He was enthusiastic enough to change some of his plans, and when one day Mrs. Holladay paid her usual visit to him she was surprised and half frightened by the boldness and vigor of his coloring.

"Mr. Rantoul, you are really wonderful," she said.

"I suppose it's the cold air and the bright sun that have affected me."

"There really is a good deal in nature, isn't there, Mr. Rantoul, that stimulates one; don't you think it's a good deal better than tea?"

Mrs. Fanny was remarkably pretty as she rattled on in her irresponsible way, wrapped in her dark

seal-skins, her rich red cheeks aglow, and her eyes sparkling. She seated herself on a box in the room where John was superintending the workmen, and the artist was moved to say: "If you'll stay here, looking as well as you do now, I think my inspiration will continue."

Mrs. Fanny's response was a tender look which frightened John, as her determination to talk of the past had alarmed him at Mt. Desert, so he hurried on: —

"You know, my dear friend, that I have my moods: what you once called my ups and downs; and this is one of my up days. They don't come as often as I wish they would, and while they are here I must make the most of them."

"I think my house might be more of a success if you had a few more 'up' days."

Mrs. Holladay did not relish John's avoidance of her tenders of sentiment. She was a woman who enjoyed deluding herself with the fancy that she was in love; that is, properly in love, as much in love as a pretty married woman ought to be. It was generally understood by the people of her immediate set that she had always a small affair on hand; and if any one of her acquaintances called on her of an afternoon, and found the particular man of the time cosily drinking tea with her, the new visitor thoroughly understood that his call must be short if he desired to remain in Mrs. Fanny's good graces. She never made any concealment of her devotion,

whoever might be the temporary divinity, and those who saw the little comedy enacted before them knew the clever woman so well that they were amused and not at all disturbed. Mrs. Holladay was probably the only woman in Washington who could carry on a long flirtation without injury to her reputation. Each time she selected her man and began over again the old play, the rest of her little world smiled, accepted the situation, and were not surprised when it ended. One of the strong motives for her desire to secure John's services as an artist was his desirability as a winter's comrade. She made a point always of having clever men about her. A dull or commonplace man might sometimes be deceived into entertaining a hope that he might become the favored object of her swift affections, but his aspirations were never gratified. A clever woman may marry a stupid man, but she will never flirt with one. Mrs. Holladay soon discovered that there were very few clever young men in Washington. Most of the men who were interesting were so mature and staid, and were altogether so much in the "fierce light," that they could not serve the pretty woman's purpose. She had tried almost all the secretaries of legation, the officers of the army and navy who had not grown rusty while waiting for some one to fight, and now she longed for something new and different. She thought that in John she had found what she wanted. But John was not responsive. At first she concluded that he had fallen

a victim to the fascinations of Agnes Linthicomb ; and being a woman of good principle she withdrew from the field, for not for the world would she have stood in the way of the young girl's budding happiness. She might have consented to a flirtation with the husband, after or even at the wedding, but she would do nothing to alienate the affections of the lover. It became very evident to her, however, as soon as John and Scolly reached Washington, that the artist was not in love with Agnes, but that Scolly was.

Mrs. Holladay rose from the box on which she had been seated, and went about dabbling at John's work viciously. Some things were too red, others too yellow ; there was too much copper here, and too little gold there. On the whole she liked the walls in the house of her friend, Mrs. Slingsby, much better. John was finally so disturbed by her remarks that his enthusiasm gave way to anger, and, muttering to himself, " Perhaps she had better give the work to a paper-hanger : he will no doubt meet the requirements of her taste much better than I can hope to," he quitted the house and Mrs. Holladay.

The petulant lady stood in the midst of the disorder of her new building in anything but an enviable mood. She had obtained her lion, but he absolutely refused to be her appendage. She was so deeply grieved that she actually determined not to pay her usual afternoon visits. She went home and spent the rest of the day alone. This was the greatest concession to feeling she ever made.

CHAPTER IX.

THE STRONG SUN SCATTERS THE MISTS.

As John hurried on he deplored the weakness which had made him yield to the importunities of this frivolous and exacting woman. He wished a hundred times that he had never left his Boston studio. He wondered why he had been so false to his purpose as to abandon his ideal, and to subordinate his talent to the whims and fancies of a woman who, to-day more than ever before, jarred upon him, and transformed his enthusiasm into a nervous incapacity to think or feel or work.

He hastened over the brick pavements toward the hills behind the city. It was a beautiful day of late winter, one of the days that come to no city in the country as to Washington. The soft warm breeze caressed him as he moved on. The delicate green of the grass, which had not entirely disappeared during the cold weather, seemed refreshed and renewed with this early promise of returning spring. Buds were swelling on the soft maples. The clean streets were alive with carriages rolling noiselessly from house to house. Bright children bounded over the sward of the little parks. Not a cloud was in the clear blue sky overhead. John did not feel the pleasant

atmosphere, nor did he hear the cheerful noises of the air and the streets. He did not look into the sky nor ahead of him, but his eyes were bent on the sidewalk, and his thoughts were on the blankness of his life.

Suddenly, he realized that a shadow lay across his path, and, glancing up, he saw Mrs. Randolph standing before him. She had stopped to look at the first robin of the season. The gorgeously breasted creature was hopping about in the court-yard before her; and she had been so intent on watching this herald of his tribe, as he surveyed his surroundings in his absurdly wise manner, as if inquiring as to the propriety of returning to the city so early in the season, that she had not noticed John's approach.

When John saw her his mood was changed almost instantly. The friendly light in her gray eyes, and the pleasant smile of welcome which she gave him, brought back to him the glory of the perfect day. The shadow that had crossed his path had projected the shining loveliness which until now he had been unconscious of.

"You are always coming to me when I need you most," he said abruptly, taking her hand.

"You could not say anything that would please me more," she replied.

Then the two went on together. Mrs. Randolph was the first to break the silence.

"Now that you have told me that you need me, and that I am of some small service to you, you must tell me why."

John hesitated a moment, and then replied, "No, I think I ought not to tell you. I ought not to have told you what I have; but let that pass. There is no reason why I should burden you with my moods."

"I think that hardly flattering," she said.

"Why is it not? I do not want to obscure your sunshine even by so inconsiderable a trifle as the narration of my own trials."

"The trials of a friend should never be inconsiderable to one. I do not think it kind to refuse to accept my sympathy. My friends always have that."

John looked at his companion, and realized that this sympathy, so freely offered, would make him happy.

"You are very good to me," he said suddenly.

She smiled, and answered: "You have been a long time finding out how very good I can be."

"I realize how neglectful I have been," he said. "You must think me singularly obtuse and blind to my privileges."

"I do." And, as she said this, she looked at him, and broke into a rippling laugh. John never heard such sweet music as this woman's voice.

"But," he pleaded, "you forgive me, now that you see how conscious I am of the happiness I have delayed availing myself of; will you not?"

"Oh, yes; I will forgive you, if you do not refuse again to tell me what I want to know."

"Why, if you really want me to pour out my griefs into your ear, I will do it with pleasure." John was so content, that his troubles seemed to him weak figments of his imagination. He was ashamed to repeat them, but he did, giving them as much importance as possible.

Mrs. Randolph seemed to greatly enjoy John's description of Mrs. Holladay's petulance, and she said to him : —

"I don't think you need trouble yourself much ; she'll very soon forget her wrath. She simply wants a little attention from you ; why don't you give it her?"

There was mockery in the gray eyes as their owner spoke these words, and John replied impatiently : "I don't care to take my amusement in that way. I have neither the time nor the skill, nor, just now, the inclination to gratify Mrs. Holladay. But her vagaries do not make the chief of my troubles. I feel that I am not doing the work I ought to be doing."

"You are doing the work of your profession, are you not?"

In answer to this question John let loose the flood of his feelings. He told Mrs. Randolph that his ambition was to be a great artist, — a creator of beautiful things ; that sometimes he felt that he had the power to do all he longed to accomplish ; that in these moments of supreme confidence in himself, — moments which now, for some reason, came oftener

to him than they had ever come before, — he painted with a skill and vigor that surprised him, when he compared the results with those of his earlier days. When he had advanced thus far in his narrative he turned to his companion, and found her listening with a look of great sympathy.

"Don't stop, please," she said.

John protested that he was talking too much of himself, and he feared that she would weary of his egoism ; but Mrs. Randolph simply answered : —

"Please go on."

Then John did go on, telling his friend how hard it had been for him to abandon his purpose, and to turn his thoughts and devote his talents to the task in which he was engaged. He spoke bitterly of himself, of his own irresolution, of his yielding, indolent disposition, and he ended, saying : "I think I ought to have some one who would be very proud of my success, some one so near to me that it would be my supreme pleasure to gratify her. I have no one now but my mother, and the trouble is that anything I do will please her. If I should paint stripes on a boat I think she would regard them with proud satisfaction."

"You appear to think that this friend should be a woman," said Mrs. Randolph.

"Of course," he answered. "How much sympathy could I get out of a man?"

"Do not other artists give you any inspiration?"

"Without doubt, they give me ideas ; association

with men of my own craft is full of suggestion to me; but while their appreciation of what I do is very pleasant, it is not pleasant enough to compel me to toil to win it. I suppose I ought to fall in love with some good woman, and—marry her, if she would have me. Then I could paint to make her happy, and I might win the place I want to fill.”

After a short pause, in which the two walked on in silence, he continued:—

“I do not believe that I have chosen wrongly. I feel that I ought to be an artist.”

“After all you have said,” Mrs. Randolph answered, “I think you ought. There seems to me no doubt that you have chosen wisely. It is too bad that you are under the necessity of doing what you are engaged in; but there is no reason why your duties at Mrs. Holladay’s should entirely prevent your better work, is there?”

The young man wished that he could honestly say that his work drew so much on his resources that he had nothing left to give to his art. But that would have been a confession of weakness which he would not make to Mrs. Randolph. He knew well enough that his best powers were unemployed, and that he might be doing very much if he had the proper amount of well-directed industry. He had no reply to make to Mrs. Randolph’s question except a confession, and therefore he said very frankly:—

“No, there is no reason outside of myself. The

truth is that I seem to have lost ambition; that passion has always been more or less spasmodic with me; but heretofore it has been enough to keep me at work with a fair amount of energy."

John paused a moment; whenever he spoke of his own industry the thought came to him inevitably that the world did not believe in it; and he wanted those whose respect he desired to accept his statement that in his time he had worked very hard. This thought crossed his mind now, and therefore he stopped to see if his companion gave any sign of dissent. Her face showed nothing but sympathy and interest in the story, and therefore John went on: "I have worked faithfully and hard very often, but I find there is something lacking in my life. I have told you before, I think, that I lead rather a lonely life, and recently this has made me more morbid than usual. I ought to go to work now; I ought to do something every day, — but I guess Thomson was right."

"Who is he, and what did he say?"

"Don't you recollect him? He was with us at Mt. Desert, — a very good fellow, full of strength; he said that I love to talk too well to succeed in my art."

Mrs. Randolph smiled on hearing this, and told John that she shouldn't wonder if Thomson were right. "I suppose his meaning was," she continued, "that you waste your ideas in talk, instead of putting them into your pictures."

"I suppose he had some such meaning," John answered; "but I don't believe he was wholly right, do you?"

Mrs. Randolph laughed on hearing this question; it was put appealingly. At last she said, "I have known you so long, and I have been so intimately acquainted with you, that I suppose I am the best person in the world to answer that question."

John was forced to admit that his question was rather hastily put, and that Mrs. Randolph had not known him long enough nor seen enough of him to enable her to make a complete study of his character. But the truth was he never thought of her as under the necessity of going through the same mental processes as other persons employ; while he felt that she had an insight into his particular character which was thorough and accurate. It somewhat startled him to hear her response to his heedless question; it reminded him that he was dealing, after all, with a human being, and with a woman, in his relations with whom he would be obliged to observe all the laws and conventionalities with which human society has surrounded men and women. It reminded him too that there was a side of Mrs. Randolph's life in which he could never share. Unconsciously he had drifted into a feeling of perfect restfulness, as he had walked by her side, — a feeling that hardly admits of analysis, but which cannot exist permanently, if it be based on the friendship of a man and woman, unless each is the first object of the other's affection.

Now that he was awakened to the real relations between them he recognized that, while his feelings and aspirations might interest her, they must always be secondary. He could enter her domestic life only as a stranger. Her first duty was to her husband, and there were her affections also. He shuddered as the thought crossed his mind that he had in effect been pouring the secrets and feelings of his life into the ear of this hard business man, for it occurred to him for the first time that Mrs. Randolph would naturally tell her husband all that he had said of his trials and weaknesses. This made him very uncomfortable not only for the moment but many times afterward when he met Mr. Randolph, and felt himself weighed and gauged by the cold blue, business eye. John dreaded most that men should know his failings. He resented almost fiercely all jesting on his indolence and his lack of perseverance. He despised his own frailties, and knew that they were despised by all strong men. He rejoiced completely in vigor, and admired above all other things the splendid results of force. It was the manly element in his own work which he liked to hear praised; it was a virile art that he constantly proclaimed.

These thoughts followed each other in quick succession. The charm of the day had been broken, and the impetuous young man found himself wondering if it would be ever given him again to be so happy as he had been a few moments before. The two had walked out beyond the crowded streets, and

were in a part of the city where the principal buildings were two-story brick dwellings, which had been set down among the huts of negroes as skirmishers of the advancing hosts of statelier houses. Mrs. Randolph had gone far enough, she thought, and therefore she suggested to John that they turn back.

She was not unconscious of John's changed mood. From their first meeting in the summer she had taken a deep interest in him. She believed in his genius, and there was something even in his weakness that appealed to her. Almost from the first she had realized that she might exert a great influence over him, and she had determined to be of what service she could. She was charmed with the idea of inspiring John to do his best. She had a long talk with her husband about her purposes, and that worthy, common-sense person had thought well of her plan so far as he had thought at all. He supposed that his wife would encourage the struggling artist very much as he would have helped along a young tradesman, — by buying his wares. If the beautiful woman who had sat opposite him at his dinner-table every day for ten years, and whom he understood no better now than on the day she accepted him, had told him that her scheme of encouragement involved companionship with the artist, and the bestowal of sympathy, by means of which she hoped to be able to bring out the best that was in him, he might have hesitated. He had no fear for his wife (he considered her a little cold), but

he was much concerned about appearances, and he did not want John, or any man, in fact, to be put to the inconvenience of a hopeless love. He could not have realized the precise signification of a woman's sympathy in man's work, although, it is true, he did not regard the painting of pictures as coming within that category. He had never asked his wife for sympathy in his own affairs, and, to tell the truth, he had never received it. Mrs. Randolph greatly admired her husband. She found in him very excellent qualities. He was considerate, and he was an accurate, careful man, with his full share of worldly wisdom. Moreover he had a comforting presence; he looked strong and wise, and there was about him an atmosphere of contentment which is often delightful to nervous organizations. There was no intellectual companionship between the man and wife. In her home life Mrs. Randolph obtained her placidity from her husband, and her real enjoyment from her own thoughts. John Rantoul was the first man she had ever known well whose business in life was to attain to a high ideal in a profession which appealed strongly to her. The pleasure she derived from association with him was wholly intellectual; and, although she sometimes recognized that his own sentiments were strongly moved, she felt that there could be no danger to her, and she believed that she could hold his feelings in check. Having thus taken counsel with herself she determined to be the young man's friend. She

had therefore led him on to make his confessions to her.

Now she doubted for a moment the wisdom of her course. She began to comprehend that John was very impressionable, and, as the discovery troubled her, she determined that thereafter, for the man's sake, there should be more restraint in their intercourse.

As Mrs. Randolph and John turned, a man came out of one of the miserable huts of the neighborhood. He was a man of thirty or thereabouts. He was bloated with drink, but he carried himself with an assumption of dignity which did not comport with his characterless face, or with the broad-brimmed, soft white hat that was slouched over his eyes. John did not notice this man, and, being preoccupied with his own thoughts, and having his eyes cast on the pavement, he fairly ran into him. As John begged the man's pardon, the latter looked keenly at the artist. It was his habit only; he troubled himself to think very little, and therefore he had what is known as a good memory for faces. Contact with the man disturbed John, but he would not have known him had he met him an hour afterwards, whereas the other would have recognized John ten years later in Egypt. The man stood looking after the pair as they moved away from him, saying to himself: "I consider, sah, that that young fellah's in luck, by gad; majah, you nevah saw a finah woman than that, sah; no, by gad, you nevah did, sah."

Then he followed after the two, but soon they were out of his sight.

On the way back the conversation which had been broken was not resumed. The talk was of Agnes and Scolly, of other common friends, of books, of the Lenten season, in the midst of which they were, but not of themselves. It was very pleasant talk, and John's equanimity was restored by it, so that he parted with his companion in a very comfortable frame of mind. He was at peace with himself and with Mrs. Holladay, and he went back to his work, perfecting the designs which had been interrupted by the outbreak of the morning. As he was preparing to quit the house Agnes and Scolly entered. The two had been much together since the young men had come to Washington, and John enjoyed seeing the gradual and steady improvement of his friend's affair. It was their habit to drop in after a long walk, such as they had had this afternoon, to look at John's work. They were very proud of him, and besides, one, at least, was in that delightful state of mind when the power of appreciating a sympathetic friend is raised a good many degrees. They had been on a tramp to-day, through the pleasant oak groves in the outskirts, and John and Mrs. Randolph had been very near them when they turned back. In fact, on their way home, Agnes and Scolly had passed the man with whom John had collided. They were so interested in their own quick conversation that they did not observe him as he

turned slightly aside to let them go by. But he had noticed them, and had given the young woman a quick, sharp, glance in which there was a little gleam of recognition. He looked after her, and rubbed his hand over his brow as one does when a figure is seen that has a familiar aspect, but which cannot be perfectly recalled or provided with a name.

Suddenly there was a flash of intelligence in the man's usually dull eye, and he stood stock-still in open-mouthed astonishment. Then he ejaculated, "They're as like as two cotton bolls, by gad, sah, but of cose't can't be." Saying this he walked on thoughtfully.

Agnes and Scolly came bustling into the room where John was giving his final directions to the workmen. They were in high spirits, and Agnes began immediately to talk of the splendid day and of the sin John had committed in remaining in-doors with his dull paints when nature was coloring everything without with her brilliant sunshine. As she went on she wandered aimlessly about the room, picking up at length a piece of board on which John had been experimenting with a new color. As she paused in the midst of her exuberant praises of the day and their walk she was attracted by the depth and richness of tone in this color. Holding it so that the light might reveal it completely to her she said at length : —

"Mr. Rantoul, this is lovely — perfect ; what is it for ?"

"The dining-room wall," he answered.

"But that is already done, I thought."

"It was done, at least it was in design, but it must be changed. Don't you think this better?"

"Better! why this is the most superb thing I have ever seen."

"I think pretty well of it myself," he said. "You see I have not been moping while you have been enjoying yourself on this perfect day. I have done the best bit of work I have accomplished since I came here. Besides, I have had my walk too."

"Oh! you have!" said Agnes.

"Yes, I had a very charming walk with a very charming woman."

"Who was it?" asked Agnes. "It couldn't have been Mrs. Holladay, because she never walks."

John answered rather impatiently:—

"No, it was certainly not Mrs. Holladay; it was Mrs. Randolph."

"You did have a charming companion then; did you bring her here to show her your work?"

"No, I didn't think of this house or the work during the walk. I had something better to talk about. You can't talk about house-painting with a woman like Mrs. Randolph."

Scolly laughed at this outburst, and knocked about some blocks of wood that were lying on the floor, with his stick.

"You don't seem to find much difficulty in talking with Miss Linthicomb and me about what you call house-painting," he said.

"Oh, well," John answered, good-naturedly, "Miss Linthicomb and you do all the talking about the house, yourselves, and think you are listening to me."

"Now that you have had so pleasant a walk with Mrs. Randolph," suggested Agnes, "I suppose you will call on her."

"I've already done that, several times."

"A man of extremes! He was always that," put in Scolly. "He either doesn't go to see the woman at all, or he is with her constantly. It's good you're not one of the male flirts in which this town unfortunately abounds, Rantoul; for, if you were, your devotion might attract attention."

John did not enjoy this light manner of speaking of Mrs. Randolph, and he resented it by remaining silent. Neither did Scolly's remark please Agnes Linthicomb. Mrs. Randolph was to her the embodiment of dignity and purity.

John finally explained that his meeting with Mrs. Randolph was entirely accidental, and that the principal charm of the walk consisted in the change it had made in his mood. He said, very quietly, and without any apparent feeling, that he liked Mrs. Randolph very much, and that he was very glad to have renewed his friendly relations with her.

The three went out together, and, when they had left Agnes at the door of her house, the two young men went to their rooms. There was a cheerful fire in the grate of their sitting-room, and John had

never known the place to look so inviting. He seated himself in a great arm-chair, and, lighting a cheering pipe, said to Scolly, who had thrown himself on the lounge : —

“ This is the most comfortable spot in town, after all, and I’m going to stay in it more than I have. I’ve been out too much, and I’ve done too little. I intend to bestow my society on myself. Other people seem to like it. I wonder if I couldn’t enjoy it myself a bit.”

“ I’m sure I shall like it,” said Scolly, “ if you’ll remain in your present cheerful frame of mind. To tell the truth, Rantoul, you haven’t been very pleasant company of late ; but something seems to have put your disposition to rights, and, as I am obliged to see more or less of you, I’m very glad of it.”

That evening John remained in his room, and before he put his light out, and said good-night to the world, he arranged a scheme of work which included the painting of a picture, the subject of which had long lain dormant in his mind ; and the next morning saw him at his self-allotted task with much of the fresh enthusiasm he had experienced the summer before at Mt. Desert.

CHAPTER X.

CAN A GREAT LOVE BE STRANGLED AT ITS BIRTH?

AFTER John discovered that Mrs. Randolph thought that he ought not to permit Mrs. Holladay's work to consume all his powers, he greatly changed. Men found him not so talkative, and most women discovered that he was less amusing than he had been. The elder and cleverer people, however, grew to like him better; his increase of dignity and gravity added to his attractiveness for them. When he first saw Mrs. Randolph, after his walk with her, he was delighted by the pleasure which she expressed because he had returned to creative art. He felt constrained to produce something worthy of the expectations she had of him, and his picture grew, under his strong and steady touch, in a way that was marvellous to Scolly. That social philosopher actually began to be enthused by John's example, and he surprised himself one day by wondering if he, too, ought not to accomplish something in the world. It had always seemed sufficient to him to be dignified, to know what the workers were doing, to spend his generous income wisely, and to help the "better element" regenerate politics in his native ward.

He had no taste for business, hated drudgery, and was under no necessity to be a toiler. His love of Agnes Linthicomb, however, made him susceptible to any good influence, and especially eager to do something which would kindle her enthusiasm. The task which John had set himself was, just now, the object of that enthusiasm, and, therefore, Scolly's ambition was aroused, but it finally resolved itself into making him a sharer in the admiration for John's works, felt and expressed by both Agnes and Mrs. Randolph. This little group of worshippers added greatly to John's original impulse, and he worked with more diligence and with more pleasure than he had ever shown before.

Gradually he came to see more and more of Mrs. Randolph, and the more he saw of her the greater grew his respect and admiration for her. She was always ready to receive his confidences to a certain point; and he discovered that confession to her was very good for him. Still there was a barrier beyond which he could not pass; and if John had been asked, at this time, who were Mrs. Randolph's most intimate friends, he would not have counted himself of the number. She knew a good many people, most of whom happened to be uninteresting to him, but without at all considering the character of these persons he yielded precedence to them all. Thus far in his acquaintance with her he had never asserted himself. It was very seldom that he saw her alone, and he was rarely in her house except when she was

at home to all her friends. Then he went with the many and paid her what was generally a silent homage. Two or three times men whom he knew came down from Boston, and he took them to see her, sure, as he presented them to her, that he was revealing to them a beauty which they could never before have dreamed of. He was often shocked, it must be confessed, with the lack of appreciation with which he met; but he charitably ascribed the dulness and insensibility of his friends to the demoralizing influences of trade, in which they all happened to be engaged.

One evening John was the last of the guests to leave the house. He had been fortunate enough to have a long and delightful talk with Mrs. Randolph, and, as they stood in the broad hall-way together, and as he took her hand to bid her good-night, a flood of feeling came over him, and he said:—

“Your friendship has been the dearest thing I have ever had.”

Then he started up the stairs, but suddenly turned and glanced down upon her. She was looking up at him and there was a gracious kindness in her eyes and in her voice, as she answered:—

“I am sincerely glad if it has done you any good.”

Then she recognized something which gave her a great fright. She saw the man's face glorified with his love of her. There was no mistaking the signals which his passion had flung out. She had

never seen such telltale eyes as his were at that moment. He stood before her transfigured. He could not have told her more plainly, in words, that he was in love with her.

Mrs. Randolph was alarmed, and, turning quickly away, went to seek her husband who was smoking in the library, and wishing that the summer would come, that he might be rid of the social burdens which his wife's popularity imposed upon him. It was late in the season. Easter was a joy of the past, but Mrs. Randolph kept up her weekly "evening." The good man was about suggesting that the weather was getting warm, that his wife was fatigued with the duties of the winter, and that she might as well abandon her entertainments, when he noticed that she was laboring under some extraordinary excitement. Going to her, and taking her hand in his, he asked, "Has anything unpleasant happened you?"

For a moment she looked at his strong, calm face, and her excitement seemed to vanish. She smiled and answered, "Nothing. I suppose I am tired and need rest."

He was not satisfied, however, that she was not concealing something from him. He had no thought but that her own mind and heart were as open to him as the day, but he could not help feeling that something had disturbed her. She took life so easily that its burdens did not wear her out. Her strength had been always equal to her duties, and he

had never seen her so nervous and excited as she was at the moment of her entrance into the library. Now she was calm enough, for her husband's presence had always a restful effect. He did not know this, nor indeed did he know what a highly nervous organization his wife's was. She appeared to him to be as calmly content with existence as he knew himself to be, and her excitement of the moment before had been a revelation to him. He was certain that she had been distressed by some one, and as Rantoul was the last person with whom she had spoken, he at once suspected him as the cause of his wife's agitation. At last he said to her, "Perhaps you are doing too much for others. I have an idea that the limitations of a woman's sympathy are not generally understood."

She knew what he meant, and she answered mechanically, "Probably you are right." Then looking at him confidingly, she went on, "You are generally right, and I sometimes feel the need of your wisdom very much." When she heard the door shut behind John she went to her room. Her husband followed her with his eyes, and, when she was out of sight, he turned to his half-finished cigar and his thoughts, muttering to himself, "I've read a good deal about the encouragement a good woman can be to ambitious young fellows, but I never believed it to be good for the woman. It stirs them up too much." As he puffed out the smoke slowly, he continued, "Rantoul must have said something that agitated

her. I wonder what it could have been ! Perhaps he told her that he loved her." The absurdity of this amused him ; not because he thought it strange that John should love his wife ; he did not understand how any man could resist her charms ; but neither could he understand how any man could have the temerity to offend her by speaking of his love. He smiled as he pictured to himself John shrinking in terror before the cold glances of his proud and reserved wife. He wondered again, for the thousandth time, how even he had the courage to ask the momentous question of the stately person who had bestowed her hand upon him. In a short time he resumed his reflective soliloquy : "No, I suppose he's been waking up her mind on art. I'm glad he doesn't see much of her ; he'd keep her mind wide awake all the time. I fancy now that she won't sleep all night, and she'll be down to-morrow with a headache. Poor girl ! poor girl ! she's got too much mind, and she ought not to be stirred up so much."

Mrs. Randolph went to her own room to think out the situation. She was in danger of something she most dreaded. While, of all the men she had ever known, John was the most congenial to her, she had thus far believed that the bond between them was wholly intellectual. Now, however, she had discovered that the man was possessed of a deeper passion. In all her married life she had scrupulously avoided every appearance of evil. She knew many women who were faithful to their husbands but who per-

mitted the devotion of other men ; but she was above seeking pleasure in that way, and now she thought she saw impending the evil which she had escaped for ten years. At first she was very angry with John. What right had he to permit himself to become enamored of her ? Why had he not gone away from her when he found that he might lose control of himself ? She was sure that she could never forgive him. His recklessness was unpardonable. But what troubled her most was how to rid herself of an acquaintanceship which had so much promise of ill in it. In the first place it was not easy for her to determine to deprive John of her friendship, but there was no doubt in her mind, except when she permitted her memory to go back to the pleasant hours of their companionship, and to what she considered the splendid results of her influence over him. The thought of this greatly affected her. She was proud to be the inspiration of so strong and worthy a man. These reflections were followed by an outburst of impatience. She asked herself passionately, "Why could he not have taken the good that he was receiving, and leave me the pleasure I enjoyed, without spoiling all with his love?"

Again she went rapidly over the events of the evening, and the growth of their friendship. At times she realized how subtle and imperceptible must have been the growth of the man's passion. She examined her own conduct to discover whether anything which she had said or done could have led him

on; but she could find nothing not wholly circumspect. She knew that she had not been tempted. One of the chief causes of her anger was that the revelation which had been made to her compelled her to question her own heart, and she recoiled from the inquiry, though put by herself, as from an insult. Then she wondered if she had read the signs aright, and asked herself if she had not judged John too harshly. At first she was certain that his glowing eyes and lighted face could mean only one thing, — something of the existence of which she had never dreamed, and which repelled her from the man whose friendship had been very pleasant to her. As she sat before the fire in her dressing-room her excitement wore away, and there succeeded a calm which gave her an opportunity for reflection. She sat there far into the night thinking. She did not need to think of her own position. She had no fear for herself. She knew perfectly well that she could never be drawn into an alliance which would compromise her. What she dreaded was that any man except her husband should be in love with her. Although her beauty had made her the recipient of attentions from many men, this one was the first of whose love she was conscious. But again the query was was she conscious of it? What right had she to take final action on appearances? Perhaps the feeling that was in John's face was for some one else, or for a memory, or was merely a passing flood. When she had finished her thinking she had deter-

mined to give John another trial ; but her intention was, also, to be still more guarded with him. She would see less of him, and she would tell him by her manner that the barrier between them had been builded a little higher.

She had reasoned herself out of her clear-eyed certainty into doubt. She was about to make a dangerous experiment ; she was going to put John to another test before finally deciding that he could no longer possess her friendship.

The strong emotion that had seized him had been a surprise to John. For a time he surrendered gladly to his love of this beautiful woman. He walked through the streets without consciously touching the pavement, as if he were flying through an atmosphere of pure ozone. He went to his room, and was too happy to be still. Scolly had returned before him, and was waiting for a quiet chat, " before turning in for the night," he said, adding, " You've taken your time about coming home, Rantoul."

" It's not late, is it?" asked John. " I've come directly home."

Scolly whistled softly, and went on, " The last one away, again?"

John did not like the tone in which this question was asked. As he had himself suddenly become conscious of his love, he felt that his penetrating friend had detected him. Therefore, he made no answer. Scolly laughed good-naturedly, and, reaching over to the tobacco-jar, continued : " It's lucky

that your enchantress is so cold, and that Randolph is so imperturbable."

This careless speech brought John instantly face to face with the reality. He saw the hopelessness of the passion which he had been actually enjoying only a moment before, while Scolly saw the pain written on his friend's face, and he wished a thousand times that his idle tongue had been still. "What a dolt I am!" he thought. "I ought to have found out long ago that Rantoul won't stand joking about that woman." He longed to say something that would heal the wound which he had inflicted, but he could not; and, without uttering a word, he saw John take his hat and go out into the streets.

John went out because he desired to be alone. Scolly's presence, his voice, his comfortable manner, his evident contentment, the familiar objects, and the glaring light of the room, seemed to drive him to desperation. He was excited and nervous, and, now that he had been rudely brought to a realizing sense of the horrible fact which fronted him, he felt that he must get by himself. Every sound that his friend made seemed to touch a sensitive nerve, and, dreading lest Scolly should speak to him again, he fled from his presence and from his voice.

When he reached the street he walked rapidly away from the house, not caring in which direction he went. He hurried on for a few minutes, and his thoughts were as rapid and as purposeless as his feet. He desired to think out his problem, and he

seemed unable to direct his mind to any point of it. He was entirely under the command of his feeling. Suddenly he stopped short, and took off his hat as if to permit the night air to cool his hot head.

The deep blue sky was full of stars which seemed to throb with the pulsing of his awakened heart. The splendor of the heavens gave him such a sense of pleasure that he grew calmer. For a moment the strong passion which had seized upon him relaxed its hold, and the shining spectacle that had opened to him expanded his mental vision, so that when he went on again, which he did in a very few minutes, he felt that he was prepared to reflect dispassionately on the events of the evening, and to reach a just conclusion in respect of his own conduct.

But the instant he recalled Mrs. Randolph his thoughts again became tumultuous. For hours he wandered from one street to another, unconscious of where he was. Through the black shadows of tall buildings, or across clear spaces, lighted by the moon, which had risen since he had stopped and looked at the stars, he passed, unconscious of everything but his own thoughts. Belated travellers and policemen looked after the strange figure moving aimlessly with its bent head. As the hours went by John became more composed. At the beginning he could only cry out, "Fool! Fool! What have I been guilty of? why have I glided over this peaceful sea of friendship, without keeping watch for the hidden rock that is noted on the charts of all the

love-stories which the human race has told and listened to?" He was full of condemnation of himself. He did not seek for excuses. A wild hope came to him that he might beat this love out of his heart by self-accusation. He saw nothing but his guilt; he saw the world pointing at him the finger of scorn and calling him libertine; and, last and bitterest, he saw the woman whom he loved turn from him in cold disdain. Then he determined that he would never see her again. He had not observed the fright in her face when he parted from her; she had turned from him too quickly. But, whenever he thought of Mrs. Randolph, his love of her renewed its grasp upon him, and for an instant he yielded to the intoxicating pleasure. Then he fought it off again. After the first frenzy he made inquiry of himself as to the depth of this passion. While the woman, in another part of the city, was pleading with herself the young man's cause, he began to wonder if, after all, this was not simply a preliminary outburst, which might be overcome.

It is true that he had had the symptoms and even the disease before; but he had always happily recovered, and he did not recognize the difference in degree between his other attacks and this one. Men who have been often winged by the archer rarely realize, when they receive the death-stroke, that the wound is any deeper than the hurts which have long since healed.

His walk had tired him, and with fatigue came more repose of mind. As he found that he was ready to

question himself he stopped again to learn his whereabouts. He was in the outskirts of the city, and, as he turned back, he noticed that the deep blue overhead was fading into gray. He had walked all night.

On his way home he reached several conclusions. First, he reasoned himself into the belief that he ought not to quit Washington. He had bound himself to do a certain piece of work for Mrs. Holladay, who, with all her faults, had been very generous to him. He certainly ought not to abandon her with his task half finished. Moreover, what explanation could he give for his strange conduct? He certainly could not say that he was in love with Mrs. Randolph. That would never do. Again, the passion that he felt was wholly his own secret. Whether he could overcome his love or not, Mrs. Randolph need never know of it. It should not only never touch her to harm her, but the knowledge of its existence should never be hers. Rantoul felt, too, that he was strong enough to overcome his love. He went back, as the woman herself had gone back, over the few months of their acquaintance, and there came to him so great a sense of the terrible loss that her friendship would be to him that he determined to do all in his power to retain it. He knew that, under her influence, he had grown more manly, more self-reliant, and much more fruitful. He thought that he needed her sustaining power, and that if it was taken from him, as he believed it would be if she saw that he loved her, he would again become an

aimless trifle, on whom men would, at last, pass the pitiful sentence, "He has not done what he might have done."

In view of all these circumstances John determined that he would not go away from Washington until he had carried out his contract with Mrs. Holliday; but that he would see as little as possible of Mrs. Randolph, especially if he discovered that he could not master his emotion.

When he reached his lodgings the rising sun was streaking the east with red, the glass in the tholus of the capitol was shining like a great diamond, and the small life of the city was waking up.

John crept upstairs to his bedroom. His shoes were dusty with his long walk, and his brain was as exhausted as his body. As he passed Scolly's door he knew, by his regular breathing, that the occupant of the apartment was still asleep. Then, for the first time since he had gone out of the house, the thought flashed across his mind that his sudden departure and long absence must be explained to his friend. But just now he was worn out and could not bring himself to think out a reasonable excuse for what must have seemed to Scolly to be at least incipient madness. Beyond a half-formed resolve that he would find out when Scolly had gone to bed and to sleep before making his own statement he reached no conclusion; and, without wholly undressing, he threw himself upon his bed, and in a second, almost, was asleep.

CHAPTER XI.

CONTAINS THE BEGINNING OF A CONSPIRACY.

WHEN John awoke it was noon. He changed his position slightly, turned over, shut his eyes again, and tried to get some more sleep. But he had obtained all that nature proposed to bestow upon him for that twenty-four hours. As soon as he was fully conscious the image of Mrs. Randolph came before him, but, as he had made up his mind what he was to do he did not permit himself to be disturbed. He again thought over the events of the night, and again concluded that he would remain in Washington. He was so deliciously comfortable that he found it difficult to recall the painful experience through which he had passed only a few hours before. His excitement, his nervous dread of Scolly's presence, his strange, long tramp through the dark streets of the sleeping city, were like a troubled dream. After he had refreshed himself with his bath he looked out of the window as if to assure himself that the street and the little park opposite were the same as he had known the day before. Everything was as it had been. The life which he was accustomed to had replaced that which was hurrying about when he crept into the house that morning. That morning !

It seemed yesterday, last week, an unmeasured age, since he had fled from his love, and, as he thought, had escaped it. As he turned to ring for the servant, he saw a card on the table, and on examining it, found printed on it the name of Josiah Persons. He flung it down impatiently, and said, half aloud, "I wonder what that cad is doing here!"

When the servant made his appearance he followed his morning greeting with the remark:—

"Did you git dat ar gemman's card, sah?"

"Yes, when was he here?"

"Well, I do' no percisely, sah, but I reck'n 'bout seb'n or eight or p'raps nine—somethin' like dat, sah."

"Will you ever learn to tell time within a week or so, uncle?" asked John; and he went on, "What word did he leave?"

"Well, sah, fust he asked, had you had brekfus; and when I tole 'im dat de gemmens didn't gen'ally breakfus befo' twelve o'clock, he made some kine o' remark 'bout idleness, sah, an' den he ask me didn't I know no good bo'd'n house in de neighborhood. He said he had jes' come in on de mawnin' train, and he had an idea dat you could tell him war he might stop while he was here. He didn't want to go to the eggspence ob a hotel, he said, sah."

John laughed very heartily when he heard this characteristic account of Persons, and he said to the man, whose broad grin indicated that he had gauged the thrifty young New England lawyer. "Well, I suppose you told him what he wanted to know."

"'Deed no, sah ; I nebber gibs no informashun to gemmen's frens widout de eggsspress permisshun of de gemmens demselbs, sah."

Mr. Persons had come to Washington on an important errand. Basswood's efforts to discover Mary Pickering or her fate had not been successful, and his hold on the doctor was consequently not so strong as he desired it to be. He was morally certain that the doctor had committed perjury when he swore that he had been informed of Mary Pickering's death, but of what avail was this certainty to him? The doctor was the leading citizen of the community, while the lawyer's reputation was not of the best. Moreover, even if it had been better, the presumption was against him. He would be obliged to sustain his charge, and he had no evidence. He made many attempts to find the colored man, but his correspondent informed him that both he and the cabin had disappeared.

In his difficulty he had sought the aid of Josiah Persons, who, he knew, would be a willing ally in any undertaking that might have promise of harm to John. Persons did not suspect himself of harboring a mean malignity. He regarded himself simply as a practical man with a worthy ambition to earn a fee.

In this business his compensation was to be contingent. Basswood had determined that, if he ever found Mary Pickering alive, he would compel the doctor to pay him a round sum, and of this hoped-for fund he had promised the young lawyer a large part.

Persons wanted the money, and, down at the bottom of his heart, he was willing enough to help along any project which would injure his old comrade. He was precisely the opposite of John Rantoul. He belonged to the unctuous class of clear-brained, selfish, and intensely practical persons, — a class that does always what it believes to be in accord with the desires of the respectable part of the community.

Persons was a success in his native town. He had obeyed, or what is quite as well, had pretended to obey, all the local canons. As a result, he was recognized as a young man of promise, and as one of the members of the community whose motives and life were to be taken for granted. If a disrespectful person outside the charmed circle upon which the religious and political burdens of the town rested declared that the lawyer had been hard and cruel in dispossessing a widow and her orphans, driving them out into the cold streets in mid-winter because they were behind in their rent ; or that money sometimes made its way into his pocket by devious paths ; or that, while he led a total abstinence movement, the local vender of beer continued to deliver to him, under the friendly cover of night, dozens of seductive bottles with patent stoppers ; or that envy, hatred, and malice governed his mind, even while he sang loudest in the Friday evening prayer-meeting ; if any or all these charges were preferred against Persons, the ruling spirits of the town treated them

as the jealous emanations of the wicked, and scored one more offence against the unhappy accuser.

Although Persons was eminently respectable, and although he was town-clerk and on the road to the Great and General Court, he was not socially very far removed from Basswood. The older lawyer was a hanger-on of the leaders, for he was very useful to them. They knew that his character was bad; that he was dishonest; that he would lie and cheat, and that, if he could do it without apprehension, he would steal. But sometimes even a good man cannot see the way to accomplish a desired result without a resort to vice, and, in such an emergency, a man like Basswood becomes necessary. He had ways of squeezing claims of doubtful validity out of debtors, and of drawing papers giving an unfair advantage to a rich client, which made him a very useful adjunct to the ruling element of Stonecliff.

With all his petty vices, vices that may be gathered up under the generic name of dishonesty, Basswood had two supreme virtues: he was a prohibitionist, and attended the church regularly. These shining qualities gave him a social status that could not have been attained by a man of probity, who drank claret with his dinner. For the greater part of his life Basswood's position had been in danger, because of his almost constant impecuniosity; but, since the doctor had become his indorser, he paid his debts with some regularity, and was, consequently, held in higher esteem. People, indeed,

wondered why the doctor should depart from his custom in behalf of such a man as Basswood; but the men of the doctor's own set, no matter how strong might be their suspicions, never gave them tongue. The gossips, however, the honest gossips, who talk much, and often injuriously, but who detest the vices of others, no matter who, insisted on suspecting that the doctor's apparent generosity had some connection, close or remote, with Mary Pickering's disappearance. However that may be, as suspicion had never ripened into conviction, and as both men were on the outside of jail walls, the lawyer was tolerated, and the doctor was followed as a leader.

Basswood, therefore, did not hesitate to seek the aid of Persons. He informed the younger man of his suspicion that Mary Pickering lived, and that, if she were found, the doctor's wealth might be shared among the three, instead of going to the unlawful and unrighteous enriching of one.

"What makes you think she's alive?" Persons had asked.

"Wall," answered the shrewd old man, "jest on gen'ral principles. Folks don't die jest because other folks stop seein' of 'em. B'sides, dead folks become fixtures. A corpse is put into the ground, and there's a grave that can't move round and escape. I guess, if Mary Pickerin' was dead we'd have found her grave somewar, and this absence of tomb seems to me a fatal defect in the doctor's case." The

lawyer chuckled almost silently, but heartily for him, as he uttered his grim metaphor.

Persons had no imagination, and he did not take in the full force of Basswood's reasoning, so he responded: "I can't see why you believe that the girl's alive because you haven't found her grave. Graves may be hidden, at least not discovered, as well as folks."

Basswood did not himself know why he believed that Mary was not dead. He had a notion though, that she still lived, and he did not think any the better of Persons for not accepting this sentiment about her.

He went on: "Persons, I think I know what I'm talkin' about, and I tell ye the girl's alive."

To this authoritative speech, the crafty Persons answered: "Well, you may be sure, but I aint, and I don't think I can afford to engage in any enterprise that's so hazy and uncertain."

This closed the negotiation for the time, but the young man's desire for money and his undeveloped malice united to help Basswood's cautious persuasions, and the result was that Persons was soon brought to admit that there was doubt enough about Mary's death to make a search worth while, especially as success would open so fine a mine for the reward of the two conspirators.

Having induced Persons to consent to help him follow up any clue that might seem reasonable, Basswood told his assistant that he had received infor-

mation that a man named Strand recently made his appearance in Washington. His Southern lawyer correspondent had been at the capital on some patriotic business, and met the man in a hotel lobby gathering of decayed and expectant statesmen who are locally known as the "colonels, majors, and judges." Strand's name and appearance had not greatly impressed the lawyer at the time, but, when he returned to his home, he received one of Basswood's letters, and then it occurred to him that the bloated young bar-room orator greatly resembled the bloated old mountaineer with whom Mary Pickering was left by Dr. Rantoul. The man, too, was of about the age of Strand's son, and, on the whole, the likeness was close enough to warrant a letter to Basswood, giving him an account of the chance meeting.

It was this letter which brought Persons to Washington. It was characteristic of him that he called at once on John Rantoul. The fact that he was engaged in an effort to take away his friend's fortune, and that he was inimical to his old companion, did not prevent him from seeking favors of him. His first wants were a cheap boarding-house and some one to show him the "sights." These obtained and out of the way, business could be attended to in a thoroughly business manner; that is, without pity and without remorse. Besides, there was no reason why John should ever know the nature of this errand to Washington.

Although John hated the young lawyer, he yielded to all his demands, and Persons accepted the attentions which were shown him in that free and independent spirit with which all good American citizens receive what they term their rights. John did not take his visitor—for it was in this character that he supposed Persons had come to Washington—to his club, nor did he present him to his friends. Scolly, who knew and detested the lawyer, was very cool and distant; and Persons, weighing the kindnesses which he received against the snubs, was sore and angry.

He was delighted, therefore, when he met Strand. Persons had sought what was to him the alluring glitter of the lobby of a big hotel. The marble-floored room, brilliantly illuminated, was such a contrast with anything which he had ever seen that he had become one of its frequenters. He came to look at the crowds which gathered there, as well as for the object of his search, for it was in such a place that Basswood's correspondent had first seen the man who might be the son of the family with whom Mary Pickering was left. On this evening the scene was animated and picturesque. The long settees were filled with men of semi-respectable appearance. Some of them were evidently in an expectant frame of mind, and others were in a hopeless state. Occasionally a new arrival addressed one of them, and while he was always courteously received, it might have been observed that, in

some instances, the greeting was cordial even to effusiveness, while in others it was that of old acquaintances who see a good deal of one another, and who are rather bored in each other's society. These men who sat on the settees were the "colonels, majors, and judges." They were afflicted with the dry-rot of politics, and they were stranded. Their occupation had once been office-seeking, but now they were content with securing the acquaintance of public men. They were the familiar advisers of new congressmen, and the humble servants of statesmen who had achieved senatorships.

The cordial and effusive greeting was for victims at whose expense the settee-loungers obtained their needed stimulants; the careless nod was for fellow-workers on the ingenuous new member who fondly imagines these men of the hotel lobby to be the clever wits who, history teaches, are always to be found at the capitals of great governments. Other men stood about in groups, and told and laughed over stories of great men whom lapse of years rendered still greater.

There was the sound of voices, the click of billiard balls, and the glare of gas-light, and all these things were pleasing to Persons. He wandered from one group to another to find Strand. He studied every man who appeared to be about thirty years old. When he saw one of that age talking in a group he lingered near him in order that he might catch his name. Thus far, during his stay in Washing-

ton, he had been unsuccessful. A baffling fate had prevented the mention of Strand's name, if, indeed, Strand had ever been within hearing. This evening, however, the long search and the anxious prying were to be rewarded. Three or four men came suddenly out of the bar-room, and attracted the attention of Persons by their loud laughing and talking. One of them was young, bloated, and wore a white soft hat slouched over his eyes. He leaned against one of the white posts in the lobby and continued the story which he had begun within.

"An' I tell yo', gentlemen, the senator said it was the best piece of political work he had ever seen done ; an' I reck'n he's no slouch at that business himself."

The other members of the group nodded assent. Admiration was expressed in every bleared eye. There was a grave dignity about these men which contrasted strangely with their evident worthlessness. Finally, one of them said : —

"Majah Strand, it's very strange to me, sah, — and I trust that I am not overstepping the bounds of propriety, sah, in giving my private opinion on such a purely personal mattah, — it seems unaccountable to me that such extr'or'nary talents for o'ganization, if you will permit me, sah, as yours, have not been employed mo' in the public service."

Persons caught the name as soon as it was pronounced. He had at last found his man. He walked nearer to the group, and, in his forgetfulness

of everything but his mission, he actually joined it. The bloated young man with the white hat attracted him as a snake charms a bird. He could not look at anything else, and yet he did not lose that fine attribute of prudence which had always served him so well. He was an admirable keeper of his own secrets, and, while he was enchanted by the young publicist, he did not forget to study him. It did not require much time for so shrewd a man as Persons to discover Strand's weak point, and the sharp New England lawyer very quickly determined that this babbling politician would not be difficult prey. In order to assure himself, and, if possible, to discover more about Strand, he did not at once interrupt the conversation.

In answer to the last complimentary effusion, Major Strand assumed even a still more ludicrous amount of dignity. He pursed his lips, was solemnly silent for a moment, and finally answered:—

"Well, col'nel, I've not been entirely without honah in a public way. On one occasion since the war, sah, when I was at home, in the days when the affairs of our State were in the hands of scallywags and carpet-baggers, gen'l'men, I was selected to take charge of a delicate affair. But I've never been anxious to hold office, sah; although in the little affair of which I speak, I may say, sah, that I was moderately successful. I prefer, sah, to stand off and watch the drama, and occasionally to assist a friend like Senator Pelican in the 'furtherance of his ambition."

To this and to a good deal more of the same kind Persons listened until he had come to be recognized as one of the group. The orators found him a good listener, and they willingly accepted his invitation into the bar-room. Here he managed to get Strand separated from his companions, and the following conversation occurred : —

"Did I understand you to be from Texas, Major Strand?"

"Yes, sah; I have the honah to be an humble representative from that great State."

"Oh! a member of the House?"

"No, sah; no, sah; when I used the term representative, I meant the broader signification, sah; I meant it in the sense of citizen."

Major Strand's bearing was now so dignified that his white hat and shiny coat, became actually insulting to him in their inappropriateness.

"Texas is a great State," ventured Persons.

"Sah, it's an empire;" and then the major wandered off into a eulogy on Texas, its men and women, its beef, cattle, and its other products, which his canny interviewer did not interrupt. Finally, when the grandiloquent southerner paused for breath, the lawyer put another spice of flattery into his intellectual dough.

"You must have known a great many prominent men in your day, major, and have played a leading part in great events?"

Strand had fallen upon good fortune. Here was

a man after his own heart, — a good listener, and deferential to a degree which was becoming more and more rare in the capital of the nation. He stroked his chin thoughtfully, looked wistfully at the bar, — a hint which the prohibitionist was quick to take, — and went into an ornate narration of a life of power and influence, to hear which would have made Warwick die with envy. He concluded his imaginative tale by saying, "and yet, sah, I am not rich, I am po'. Yo' are a stranger to me, and I am very happy to make yo' acquaintance, I'm sure, very happy, sah; but yo' must see, sah, that I am not possessed of that happy independence in respect to means, that is fitting fo' a man of my position, and a man, who, I may properly say, sah, has made the political fortunes of more men than any one within the range of my acquaintance, sah."

"I suppose the war impoverished your people?" suggested the sympathizing Persons.

"That's exactly it, sah; yo've hit the nail straight on the head, and, if yo' will permit me to say so, sah, yo've alluded to a tender subject in a very delicate manner. It was the war, indeed, that swept my fortune out of existence."

"Are you a native of Texas?" asked the lawyer.

Strand looked furtively around on hearing this question, as if to assure himself that no one was within hearing. The two were quite alone in the corner of the room. The answer was, "No, sah,

very few gen'l'men were bo'ne in Texas. Texas is a State where people go to ; it's altogether too young for a gen'l'man to be bo'ne into, sah. No, I was bo'ne and raised in No'th Car'lina and it was that grand old State that my father fo'te for during the wah."

"It must have been very hard to leave your old home, to break up the associations of years, to leave the spot which no doubt was made very dear to you by the traditions of your family."

Strand's usually dull eyes actually sparkled at this appreciative acquaintance ; but his face took on a look of grief as he sighed in answer : "Yes, sah, yo' are right. It was. But my father died during the wah, offered up his life, sah, like a gen'l'man, fo' his principles and his honah, and after the wah my mother, sah, a beautiful woman, sah, noted for her beauty through the whole State, married a Texas gen'l'man. I was a mere lad then, sah, and as our property was swept away, and consumed by the Yankees, and there was no one left but my adopted sister and me, I went with my mother, sah."

It was apparently painful to Strand to recall all these incidents, and there was a huskiness in his throat which appealed once more to the conscienceless generosity of the total abstainer.

Persons was greatly excited. The scent was growing warm. Here was a man with the proper name, the proper birthplace and the proper family history. And yet with all his excitement the young man's prudence

still did not desert him. He continued to worm out Strand's story piece by piece, until he learned that he was in the city alone. The tale of former wealth and grandeur, and of present influence, did not deceive Persons. During the few days of his stay in Washington he had become perfectly familiar with the genus to which Strand belonged. He could not mistake a poor white of the mountains banking on the calamities of the war for a Southern gentleman. He was sure that the man before him belonged to the same class as did the Strands with whom the doctor had left Mary Pickering.

Finally, he made inquiry about the adopted daughter. "You spoke of an adopted daughter, Major" —

But Strand interrupted him with a quick, nervous gesture, saying, "Ah, sah, spare me any allusion to that. I am aware, sah, that yo're motives are good, but strangers cannot penetrate the secrets of a gen'l'man's bosom. Unfortunately" —

"Not dead, I trust," gasped Persons. His terror almost betrayed itself. But Strand mistook the emotion for sympathy.

"No, sah, no, not dead ; but she has left our roof-tree, and — and — excuse me, I'd rather not speak of her."

Persons had learned enough for one night. He gave his address to Strand, considerably pressed a small loan on him, and quitted the hotel, satisfied that at last he was on the track. But Mary's disappearance, and Strand's ignorance of her whereabouts, troubled him.

CHAPTER XII.

A GENTLEMAN OF HONOR.

PERSONS became a generous entertainer of the dissolute gang of men of whom Strand was one, and the more he sought their society the less he saw of John, — not greatly, it must be confessed, to the artist's discomfort. As a result of this comradeship Persons learned that Strand was really the man for whom he had come to Washington to look. The North Carolinian was of about the same age as John Rantoul, so that he was a boy ten years old when Mary Pickering was taken South by the doctor. The boy and girl had lived on the "plantation," as Strand persisted in calling the place, during the war, but as soon as peace came Mrs. Strand remarried, and Mary was adopted by a Virginia family. Young Strand did not know the name of the people who had taken the girl away. His mother had refused to tell him anything of them, saying that, for a child of her birth, Mary had seen enough of poverty and trouble, and that it was best that no Strand should ever again cross her path. Therefore she had taken advantage of her son's absence on a hunting expedition to send Mary to some people who had been spending the summer in the mountains, and who,

attracted by the child's beauty and gentleness, desired to adopt her.

Since then the foster-brother had not seen her, and he had known no reason why he should much concern himself with her affairs, until Persons suggested that some money might be made by finding her. Upon this hint Strand set his wits to work, and endeavored to discover a clue; but his muddled brain, never a very effective instrument, could not accomplish so much as a suggestion.

"I don't know her appearance, sah," he said to Persons. "She's changed, of co'se, and it's next to impossible to find a woman by simply searching for her. Suppose we advertise for her, sah."

"That would be very prudent," answered Persons, dryly.

"Well, sah, I really don't see anything unwise in the suggestion. The only difficulty I find is that it naturally is opposed to a gen'l'man's finah feelings, sah, to put a lady's name in the advertising columns of a newspaper, at so much a line."

"I don't suppose you do see how unwise advertising is."

"Why don't you advertise then, sah?"

"I'm afraid it might hurt your finer feelings to see Mary Pickering's name in print."

"Nonsense, sah; I shall not permit you to make insinuations, sah. You understand the peculiarities of this case, just as well as I do, sah."

"I don't think it's peculiar; you're in it for

money. That's a common enough feature of cases, isn't it?"

"Sah, yo' are too vulgar for a gen'l'man to have anything to do with; and if it wasn't, sah, that I consider the honah of my family somewhat involved in this affair I would cease all relations with you at once, sah."

"I don't see why you don't as it is. It appears to me that your family honor isn't worth such a great sacrifice as you seem to be making."

Then Persons, thinking that he had wasted enough time in tormenting his victim, went on: "But let's come to business. This proposition of yours, to advertise, is as worthless as all the others which you have made. There is nothing in any of them. I've found out that Basswood's friend in North Carolina knows nothing about Mary's adoption, and there is nothing to hope for from that quarter, or apparently from your old home. The only person in the world of whom we have any knowledge, who knows the people with whom Mary Pickering lives, is your mother. And our information must be obtained, somehow, from her."

Strand's smile was almost shrewd as he answered, "Well, now, I reck'n you'd just better try to find out from ma what she aint any mind to tell yo'."

"Of course I can't find out, because your mother would suspect me of having designs against the girl."

"Now," continued the lawyer, "we had better bring this business to a head quick. It strikes me

we've got the doctor now, but we want him faster, for he's hard to hold. You find Mary Pickering, and your fortune's made."

"But how'm I going to if you won't advertise?"

"Darn it! do stop palaverin' about advertisin'. Go down to Texas and see your mother." Persons was rural in his speech whenever he became excited.

"Sah, I tell you that ma's a woman of honah, sah, and she won't tell what's became of the girl."

"Strand, you're a darned fool!"

"Sah, that's a personal matter, and I can't" —

"Oh! don't pretend your going to fight me, for you aint; I can't fight and you won't. Go and see your mother. If she don't talk, she's interested in Mary, and she probably gets letters from her, or about her."

"You desire me, sah, a Southern gen'l'man, to open ma's letters? No, sah; no contingent fee can induce me to do that."

This rascal, who clung so tenaciously to his tattered honor, exasperated Persons, and yet the stake was too great for the lawyer to permit untimely wrath to interfere with the game. He therefore replied softly to Strand's hypocrisy, and in the end prevailed upon him to take the journey to Texas. He knew that he would never go if he were given money before he started. Persons recognized the fact that a "colonel," or a "judge," or a "major," never resists the temptation of displaying such an unusual acquisition as money. And in his view a display of

wealth can only be properly made in those alluring places where currency is easily converted into liquor. In view of this Persons bought Strand's railway ticket for him, and did not give him any money until the train was about starting out of the station. The immediate friends of the major went to see him off. They did not know his errand, but their own mental inclinations, assisted by Strand's intimations, led them to the conclusion that the New England lawyer wanted some very delicate diplomatic work done in Texas, and that he had properly selected one of their distinguished number to attend to it.

When Persons had despatched Strand he went back to New England. John was glad to be rid of him, and so were Scolly and Miss Linthicomb, although the last two had been troubled very little by his disagreeable presence.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SPRING EPISODE.

ONE warm day in the early spring, a week or so after John's tramp, Scolly and Miss Linthicomb were engaged in a comfortable chat on the wide, shady, porch in the rear of the Linthicomb house. The air was soft and balmy, the birds had finished their nest-building, the grass was a rich lush-green, the forsythia bushes were full of yellow flowers, and the tree-tops were hazy with the tender verdure which was just beginning to greet the spring. It was a day when a man and a woman who had been much together in the hurry and excitement of the season might sit contentedly in each other's presence, and permit the experiences and feelings of the busy months to concentrate into warm sentiment. Scolly had no need of leisure to inquire of himself. He was in love when he quitted Boston, had been in love all winter, and was just now indulging his whole relaxed nature in an amatory bath. There existed between the two for the moment that thoroughly delicious relation which often finds its pleasantest expression in silence. Now and then there was a lazy question, and an equally lazy answer. One would have recognized that the man

and woman were on excellent terms. Miss Linthcomb at last said : —

“Do you think when a man who is married, or a man who hasn’t any right to, falls in love with a woman, that he can keep it from her?”

Scolly hesitated a moment, and then answered, “I’ve never had any experience. I don’t know whether a man can help telling a woman he loves her or not.” Then, after a pause : —

“I think that love for a woman is one of the hardest confessions to make, and yet I suppose that it is the most inevitable. Some time or other I imagine a man who is in love must tell of it.”

“But suppose the man has no right to love the woman?”

“Do you mean, if the man or the woman is married?”

“Yes.”

“A gentleman won’t get himself into any such scrape.”

“I am not at all sure that you are right. Most gentlemen, I admit, will not, because most gentlemen are incapable of falling completely in love. I mean — of course you know what I mean — there are very few men, or women either, who are capable of great love.”

This speech was the cause of some embarrassment. Miss Linthcomb studied her fan very closely, while all the vivacity fled from her face, being replaced by that expressive calm which indicates that the will is very busily engaged in repressing the emotions.

Scolly's well-defined ideas of propriety were in great danger. The situation was becoming grave by reason of the almost imperceptible current which had drifted the two together. He had never dreamed of becoming affianced except in the way in which his traditions pointed out. He was one of the many who believe in obtaining the guardian's consent first and the young woman's answer afterwards, or else the guardian's formal refusal before running away with the ward."

"I don't know about most men," he was slowly and thoughtfully saying, when he stopped, his attitude and manner changing from indolent comfort to eagerness, as he went on abruptly, "What kind of love do you think me capable of?"

"Why, I've never endeavored to measure your capacity, Mr. Scolly?"

The tone in which this was uttered seemed to Scolly to indicate indifference. At any rate the little nature which had pushed out from the shell of his civilization was frightened back and the young man stammered, "I beg your pardon; I ought not to have made a personal application of your remark."

"Don't you think that remarks are generally taken to be personal?" his companion asked.

"I suppose they are; they are generally intended to be."

Miss Linthicomb opened her fan with a vicious little snap and plied it vigorously, and yet the weather was not really so warm as it would become. When she

replied, she betrayed a little feeling, saying, "A personal application is often very presumptuous; the subject is so much greater than the object, you know."

Scolly said nothing, but, rising from his comfortable chair, walked up and down the piazza with his hands in his pockets and perplexity on his brow.

When he walked away from her Miss Linthicomb's eyes followed him, and there was a good deal of feeling in them, combined, perhaps, with a shade of anxiety. When he turned towards her she was always looking straight ahead, with that settled calm on her features, the meaning whereof another woman could have interpreted perfectly, but which was very baffling to Scolly. After the young man had taken two or three turns on the piazza, not knowing what to say, Agnes rose and stood carelessly against the railing. Suddenly she called out, "O Mr. Scolly, the crocuses have come!"

Her voice was friendly now, and Scolly, standing by her side, looked down at the small yellow things pushing their way into the world between the blades of grass. She pointed out the flowers, betraying a good deal more enthusiasm than seemed to be called for, especially as the crocuses had really come some weeks before. Nevertheless, Scolly found himself taking what he supposed was an interest in the flowers; at any rate he was in a better atmosphere. Very soon, however, he discovered that his concern in the crocuses was only a polite one, and that he was en-

tertaining a very strong desire that the eager young woman would exhaust the armory of adjectives which she was firing at the insensate vegetables, and turn her attention to him. He made several awkward beginnings, but at last, when her enthusiasm, in which there had been a good deal of nervousness, was exhausted, he said : —

“ I hope you’ll not think me presumptuous : when I asked you about myself, I didn’t for a moment fancy that you had me in mind when you spoke of the rarity of great love.”

“ Didn’t you ? ” Scolly thought he had never heard so sweet a voice, and as Miss Linthicomb looked down and played aimlessly with the sticks of her half-closed fan, he felt that his time had come. But suddenly this inexplicable young woman moved away, saying, “ But don’t let’s talk about that any more. It’s hardly worth while. What a perfect day it is ! ” And then she illogically fanned herself, as if it were a hot day in August.

But Scolly had made up his mind to go to the end, so he went on : “ Don’t you think you can let me speak a moment on the subject that is nearest to me ? ”

Miss Linthicomb became outwardly calmer, and, after some hesitation, answered, “ I shouldn’t be so good a friend of yours as I really am, if I couldn’t.”

Upon receiving this kind permission, Scolly found it difficult to go on, but at last he said, stammeringly, “ I suppose I ought to have spoken first to ” —

then he stopped, and Miss Linthicomb glanced at him. He went on again: "Of course you must have seen, a hundred times" — then he stopped again, and, catching another glance, he burst out, "I'm too much in love with you to say more or to think more than just this: I love you." There was silence for a moment after this sudden revelation of passion, until Miss Linthicomb, looking frankly at her lover, simply said, "I am very glad to hear you say it."

So these two were betrothed. After the first ecstatic moments they sat in silence, and enjoyed the deliciousness of the situation. The world, to them, was lighted with golden hues. The tender young leaves, just big enough to give a new atmosphere to the tree-tops, the yellow crocuses and forsythia blossoms, the bed of hyacinths, which the gardener had coaxed into bloom, grew brighter. Neither Scolly nor Agnes spoke. Each was busy listening to the glad love-song which their hearts were singing.

When Scolly's sense of propriety sufficiently recovered from the assault which his emotions had made upon it, he was moved to say: —

"I am afraid that this is all very wrong. I ought to have first asked Mr. Linthicomb for permission to address you."

The answer to this was a pleasant laugh, which first disconcerted Scolly, and then charmed him, until he once more forgot his social code, and wiped out tradition with a kiss.

"You may see my father whenever you please," answered the merry young woman, in whose eyes there was a good deal of mischief; "I hardly think he'll disapprove of anything you have done."

CHAPTER XIV.

INCAPABLE OF A GREAT PASSION.

JOHN was very valiant and self-denying for a long time after his night-walk. While there was no estrangement, there was not absolute confidence between him and Scolly. John never explained to his friend why he quitted the house so abruptly. Each had a guilty conscience. The one could not tell the truth without betraying a feeling for Mrs. Randolph, which he now regarded as temporary ; the other still held himself guilty of a thoughtlessness which amounted to cruelty. This mutual self-accusation set up a barrier, — that worst of all barriers between friends, a recognition of the existence of something that ought to be explained and which is yet inexplicable. It was better so, however, for Scolly's interpretation of John's weakness was the most charitable that could have been made. He referred it entirely to an overdose of tea. It was months afterwards before, looking back on that strange scene, he could guess the meaning of John's rushing out of the house in the middle of the night, and of his long absence.

Rantoul painted with an energy that was almost feverish. He sought pleasure nowhere except at his

easel. Mrs. Holladay's house was not neglected, but its trivial details annoyed him more than ever. He wanted all his powers for his picture. His patron's demands upon him were numerous and exacting. The important work had been done. The walls and ceilings and windows glowed with color, the like of which Washington had never looked upon. The owner of the house was delighted with John's success. She almost forgave him for his neglect of her in view of the height to which he had raised her dwelling. He had made it so beautiful that it was on exhibition, so that Mrs. Holladay's friends and enemies got up parties to visit it, the wonderment at the boldness and originality of the artist vying with the surprise that this woman of all others should have been the first to raise a question of taste by a departure from the conventional standards of the capital. Hitherto she had been content to do and wear and possess what all the world admitted to be proper. She had gone along with the rest of her set, content with sipping the honey from all the social flowers that came conveniently in her way. Now she had permitted an artist to divide the city into two hostile camps, and the taste of the decorations of her house had become a *casus belli*.

Mrs. Fanny sometimes enjoyed the situation, but at other times she was perplexed by it, for she found it necessary to take different and conflicting positions concerning her own belongings. To those who approved of the reds and golds and copper colors, and

of the rich dark effects, and of the strong, grotesque designs here and there, she complacently permitted the assumption that she had made some of the most important suggestions; but when the critics came along, piping in favor of dove color and gilded sprays, and "small patterns," and "home-like" tints, then she would turn up her eyes and sigh, and exclaim against the hard fate which had put her in the power of so *exigeant* a man as John Rantoul. When he was about the house she was very humble and contrite, not only because she paid penance for her deceptions, but because she realized the strong influence of the man whose power was so great that she would have deemed it an impertinence to intrude her advice upon him, or to attempt to stay the execution of a single detail which he had planned.

It was at Mrs. Holladay's house and at dinner that John first met Mrs. Randolph after leaving her in the hall-way of her own house. By this time he had concluded that he was not in love with her, but that the feeling which had mastered him had been born of a variety of causes, all of which were temporary. He ascribed the tumultuous rushing of his blood and the quickened beating of his heart to the delightful talk with her, to the unusual influence of her surpassing beauty, to the deep sympathy with him which she had happened to display to a marked degree on that one occasion. It was an exceptional environment, he thought, that had made him extraordi-

narily susceptible, an environment in which it was not likely he would ever be placed again. He had now no painful memory of that evening. Nothing remained that was not pleasant. If he had known that Mrs. Randolph was conscious of his feeling for her as he bade her good-night on the staircase he would have been more embarrassed when he met her again. As it was, there was constraint in his manner, the constraint of a man who feels that he has offended against a woman's friendship. This, however, was not of long duration, for Mrs. Randolph received him cordially and with great sweetness.

John thought her radiantly beautiful in her white gown, and before dinner was announced he was content to sit at a distance and look at her. She completely satisfied his sense of beauty. He did not study her features, nor could he ever, during his acquaintance with her, have said in what particular she was most beautiful. Her voice, her manner, her disposition, her charming dignity, all these, quite as much as the expressive eyes, and the soft curling hair, and the perfect mouth and chin, went to the making of her beauty. There was nothing about her that was inharmonious, nothing at least which disturbed or distracted the man who had now convinced himself that she and he might be friends without danger.

He had a thrill of exquisite pleasure when he found himself next her. And Mrs. Holladay, whom

he had taken out, had to content herself with the man on her left for most of her conversation, for, almost at the beginning of the feast, Mrs. Randolph had asked him if he had been hard at work since she had last seen him.

"Yes, I have been working, and I find work a remarkably pleasant occupation," answered John.

"The wonder to me is," she said, "that you can bear to leave it for anything else. Whenever you are at your easel you are calling out your very highest powers; you must give yourself up to the noblest sentiments; there can be no pleasure more exquisite than that."

"There really is none, I suppose."

"Why are you doubtful about it; when you are painting don't you completely enjoy yourself?"

"Not when I'm painting Mrs. Holladay's walls," was the response, and there was a good deal of dissatisfaction in the voice that uttered it.

"But you've done much more than paint Mrs. Holladay's walls since you came to Washington?"

"Oh, yes; I've painted a picture of a couple of lovers, who seem to interest people, judging from the way they have been received. But there's nothing great about it. And the walls came in to interfere a good deal. If I must go on painting walls I'll never do anything worth while."

"I saw the picture before you sent it over to New York, and I thought it very interesting; Agnes is very enthusiastic over it, and so is Mr. Scolly."

John, who really liked this tribute, laughingly replied, "Agnes and Scolly would enjoy any pair of lovers, just now, I fancy; perhaps," he added, "the more commonplace and conventional, the better."

"Why do you think they would enjoy commonplace lovers? You are not still going on the theory of a fellow-feeling, I hope."

"Not at all; Agnes and Scolly are not commonplace; but their love affair is entirely conventional, and they are happy. Happy lovers, you know, like all other lovers; they enjoy seeing other couples wandering hand in hand; they revel in pictures of young men and maidens gazing tenderly into each other's eyes. I have no doubt that it was a properly engaged man who bought my picture."

"But I really can't yet see why engaged people prefer the loves of commonplace people." Mrs. Randolph was half inclined to think that John's views on this important subject were heterodox.

"I don't know as I ought to have used the word commonplace," he explained, "for I know that an enamored pair will always sympathize with young people upon whom adversity, or an obstinate father, frowns. But I mean that they don't want love with a tragedy in it. Love is nothing to them without marriage. They don't want any Francesca di Rimini episodes to come in to disturb them. They never see the love that exists in such a union; they see only the immorality and the catastrophe."

"That speech is decidedly bad," Mrs. Randolph said after listening to it patiently. "I think that not only ought the young lovers to be glad that there is to be no tragedy in their lives, but that every one else should rejoice with them."

John made no reply to this. He was somewhat disappointed. He thought the remark unworthy of the woman. He had not condemned happy lovers; he had only said that because of their happiness they were easily satisfied. Mrs. Randolph divined his thoughts, and, after an unimportant word or two with the equally unimportant man who had taken her out, she turned again to John, and went on: "Don't think that I don't understand you. I know well enough what you are aiming at. You want to paint a great passion, and although successful and uniformly happy love may be capable of greatness, it rarely rises to that height. At least, when it is to be depicted either in art or in literature, you must tell the story that brings it out. You cannot show us a great love by painting a pair of lovers walking hand in hand through a smiling meadow."

"No," added John, "nor with a priest waiting to marry them, in the background. Of course, we know this well enough; that we cannot discover the greatness of any painting until it is put to a great test. Can the story of such a test be told by me? That is my problem."

"And it is a problem that is worth your while to solve: are you trying it?"

There was inspiration to John Rantoul even in this simple question. It was asked in a tone which indicated the speaker's confidence in his power. He had been leaning back in his chair, as he uttered his last words, and looking down reflectively, playing idly with a fork, and the question rather startled him. Was he at his old trick again? Was he saying more than he did? He had thought that he was getting beyond that accusation. He therefore answered somewhat nervously, "Yes, I suppose I'm trying it, if you call thinking about it trying it."

"No ; such thinking about it is not enough," Mrs. Randolph said, "although it is something. Thinking about it, I imagine from your manner, means dreaming over it. That will never accomplish anything. You ought to be seriously considering how to realize your ambition."

"That's very well ; but the how to do it will never come to me unless I am great enough to accomplish it."

"I think the fact that you are dissatisfied with trivial subjects is evidence that you will find out the how some day." Then she seemed to recollect that she had been speaking in a rather superior manner to a man for whose genius she had profound respect, and she added, with a smile which greatly lightened John's despondency, and which made her cheering words do their kindly office, "But why am I saying these wise things to you? they have just occurred to me, although you have probably thought about it all a thousand times."

John protested that she had given an inspiration to his mind as well as an impulse to his purpose; and that he had determined to make an effort to do something worthier than anything he had yet undertaken. "But," he continued, "there is one obstacle in the way."

"What may that be?" she asked.

"I am afraid it is in myself," was the response.

"But I thought that was what you were to discover."

"I have discovered this, I think."

"Won't you tell me what it is?"

"Of course I will tell you, and I think you will agree with me that the difficulty is fundamental. I have never been conscious of having the capacity for a great passion myself."

Mrs. Randolph did not want to talk with John about his own emotions, for she had seen enough of him to realize the danger; yet she had seen enough to convince her that he was deceiving himself, and she was so much in earnest in her desire that he might achieve all she thought him capable of that she wanted to tell him so.

Just then the man on her right signified a desire to talk with her, and the conversation with John was not resumed until later in the evening, and then only for a moment.

When the women were alone in the drawing-room, in the interval of coffee and smoke, Mrs. Randolph overheard this conversation between Mrs. Holladay and another woman: —

"He's very queer," said the woman of the house and patron of the arts.

"He's very talented, is he not?" It was evident, both from the inquiry and from the tone in which it was put, that the person alluded to had been labelled "talented," and therefore was an object of feminine admiration. The reputation is easily acquired almost anywhere, and can be held for an indefinite period by the exercise of a little prudence, for the world does not cross-examine those whom it decorates, and the average member of society would be bored by learning what the suspected talents consist of.

Mrs. Holladay answered indifferently, "Oh yes, he's talented enough; in fact, he has genius almost; but what is all that without soul? Soul is an exquisite thing, is it not, Mrs. Manson? Most of our lives are so barren because we haven't any high ideal!" Mrs. Holladay rattled on about souls and hearts in a familiar manner, as if she were talking of gowns and jewels. Her uncongenial guest admired the faculty which the pretty woman had, of talking rapidly on subjects about which she never thought deeply, but she was also humiliated and confused, and to the rapid fire of enthusiastic adjectives responded only with an occasional ejaculation or affirmative. Therefore Mrs. Holladay was brought back to her original subject as soon as Mrs. Manson could politely interrupt the soliloquy on the soul to say, "Mr. Rantoul does not appear to me to be unemotional."

"His appearance does not do him justice then," Mrs. Fanny answered. "I know him so well that I can read his face perfectly. Do you know, reading faces is a favorite occupation of mine? Whenever I'm travelling I never read books as most people do; I just read the characters of the people around me, and I am sure that I'm generally right."

But Mrs. Holladay's remarks about John Rantoul had become so interesting that the other woman did not propose to permit her to wander so far away from the subject as to lose it entirely, so she checked her discursive spirit by exclaiming, "But do tell me something more about Mr. Rantoul; I'm very much attracted by him."

"That's precisely what I'm trying to do," Mrs. Holladay answered. "Mr. Holladay tells me that I never do get to the point of a story, — but then husbands are so unjust and censorious; do you know, I never buy a new gown that Mr. Holladay likes — I mean if he takes the trouble to look at it. But we were talking about John Rantoul, weren't we? I do dislike to be led away from what I'm saying," and the voluble woman spoke as though suffering Mrs. Manson had been guilty of inducing her to wander from John into fields of social and domestic philosophy. Mrs. Holladay was discursive when she was in her frivolous state of mind. Sometimes, however, she became sufficiently concerned in her subject to hold to it with comparative steadiness. And now she saw a look on Marion Randolph's face which

indicated that the woman whom she regarded as her rival, and upon whom she had consequently bestowed her mild and rather insincere hatred, was painfully conscious of the conversation going on in her hearing. This discovery concentrated Mrs. Holladay's faculties, and she went on, thereafter, with fewer digressions.

"John Rantoul is what the men call a 'good fellow,'" she said; "but he will never be in love with a woman. He is altogether too much wrapped up in himself. Now, genius is something that requires heart, don't you know, soul, and — well just what a man has who does fall in love with a woman; don't you think so? How very few geniuses we have!"

Mrs. Holladay propounded this startling truth, not reflectively, but volubly, and with the same absence of intelligent interest in the remark as she had shown when she had once asked John if it were not hard to paint Madonnas. She did not pause for a reply either to her question or to her exclamation; and Mrs. Manson, if she troubled herself to think about the matter, was probably very glad that she did not, for her own mind was so constituted that it was not rich in answers to philosophical inquiries.

Mrs. Holladay went on briskly and airily: "For some reason or other the man seems to be in a dream all the time. He isn't half so agreeable as he used to be when I first knew him, and when he was at college."

"Has he changed so much?" asked Mrs. Manson

as her gossip stopped for breath, and to look back for a second or two on the picture of the past which her words called up.

"Oh my, yes!" exclaimed the pretty woman, "why he's even changed since I met him last summer. I don't know what it is; he's not half so agreeable, but he's more industrious. I think he's about come to the conclusion that he must work, and that industry is only compatible with surliness."

"It seems to me that I've noticed a look on his face and in his eyes which indicated very great interest in the woman to whom he happened to be talking," said Mrs. Manson.

Mrs. Randolph did not fail to appreciate the significance of these words, but she did not catch the look, even more significant than the words, by which they were accompanied. She was beginning to wonder if she were blind to something which the world was talking of, when the answer reassured her, for Mrs. Holladay quickly said, "I don't know what particular woman you may be speaking of, of course, my dear; but you are simply describing John Rantoul's manner with every woman when he is talking about himself."

"I haven't seen very much of him, you know," responded Mrs. Manson, who thought it incumbent on her to repel the idea that she had harbored an unworthy suspicion. "I meant only that I have seen him when I thought him greatly interested in what his companion was saying to him."

"Oh, that, to be sure," was Mrs. Holladay's sweet assurance, sweet to more ears than those to which they were addressed. "When you see John Rantoul looking at a woman as if he would devour her, he is simply making her his confidant and trying to get encouragement from her." Mrs. Holladay's ears had not been idle while Mrs. Randolph and John were talking during dinner. She knew the subject of the conversation, and much of what was said, and she was determined that Marion Randolph, who was trying not to listen, but who could not prevent the words reaching her, should believe that she was not the only woman in whom John appeared to be deeply interested. She would not have been very much pleased to learn that the information which she was imparting was very consoling to Mrs. Randolph, who was not, however, prepared to accept Mrs. Holladay's judgment that John had not much heart. She had seen the signs of a great passion, and, although she had reasoned herself into the belief that either she had not kindled it, or that it was suppressed before it obtained the mastery of the man, she was fearful, and was watching both herself and John with great caution. Mrs. Holladay's talk added something to her feeling of security. She did not speak to John again until she was going home, and then as she and Mr. Randolph were waiting for their carriage, he passed them on his way out of the house. She held out her hand to him and he stopped to bid her good-night, but she added to her

own leave-taking some words which rang in his ears for many days, and which brought much hope and courage to him.

"I hope you will not cease to think of doing something greater than you have ever done," she said. "I believe that you are capable of it, notwithstanding your distrust of yourself. I feel assured that the day will come when you will recognize the truth of what I tell you."

CHAPTER XV.

SPRING PLEASURE, AND AN UNEXPECTED
DEPARTURE.

THE last weeks of John's stay in Washington were full of pleasure. His hard task was finished, and he was free from a burden which had weighed on him very heavily. For he still regarded the work he had done for Mrs. Holladay unworthy of him. He felt very little pride in the fine interior he had wrought, his chief happiness coming from his release from what he deemed his bondage. Moreover, he was delighted with what he considered the reëstablishment of his relations with Mrs. Randolph. He enjoyed almost the complacency of an accepted lover. It is true he felt no raptures either in her presence or in his frequent broodings about her, and he still persisted in assuring himself that he was not in love; that while he might have had a tenderer feeling for Mrs. Randolph if no Mr. Randolph had stood in the way, he must now content himself with being her friend; he still believed that her friendship for him would cease the moment he indicated to her, in any way, that he loved her. Sometimes when he was away from her he was restless and perturbed, being unable to obtain comfort out of her presence, and at these

times he questioned himself and almost confessed the truth. Then he would go away for a day or two, and in these short attempted flights from his heart he visited most of the barren battle-fields on the Virginia side of the Potomac, and became familiar with the picturesque country on the upper reaches of the now peaceful and indolent stream.

But, with all his abstinence, he saw much of Mrs. Randolph in these last days. The air was full of invitation to pleasure-trips, and John was determined to enjoy a vacation after the labors of the winter. Therefore the two were a good deal together, on the decks of steam-boats sailing between the shores of the river that not many years back divided hostile camps, and on whose almost wharfless banks are the tenderest mementos of two great conflicts; or riding over the turnpikes of Maryland, or loitering by the tumbling waters of the great falls. The sun seemed to John to be shining for him on the quiet yellow river; the woods were green for his pleasure; even the old fort near Mt. Vernon had become a charming ruin for his delectation, and its grass-grown stones, and mouldy casemates, and decaying gun-carriages, had been fashioned by man and consumed by time that he and Mrs. Randolph might find congenial picturesqueness for their idle moments. Day after day the sun poured a clear, white, shining joy over all the landscape; the warm air wrapped him in its soft embraces; and no cloud came across his sunny nature. John experienced all the delights of an

early spring in Washington, — an early spring which is kindly enough to permit the out-of-door pleasures that are enjoyed in more northern climates only in the heats of summer. He was getting the best of Washington, the quiet intercourse of those who like each other, and the wholesome happiness which comes from opportunity for begetting and fostering intimacies, which the bustle and confusion of the season do not give, but which is found only when perfunctory duties to mere acquaintances are no longer demanded, and when friendships assume their true proportion.

The glare and glitter of receptions and balls were things of such a remote past that the world was somewhat surprised to be awakened to the fact that such entertainments were not really obsolete, but merely suspended, by invitations to a ball with which a distinguished foreigner proposed to signalize his departure from the United States. But though the world was astonished, and was thoroughly satisfied with the manner in which it was enjoying itself, it did not fail to accept its invitations, and it went to the ball in great numbers. When John Rantoul arrived, the rooms were filled with people, and the talk was at its highest. From the distance there floated through the open windows occasional notes of music. They came from the garden, which had been floored over for the dancers.

As soon as John entered the drawing-room he began a search. There was no concealment of his purpose ;

it was evident to the persons who were sufficiently disengaged to notice him that he was very anxious. His hurried glance around the first two rooms which he entered, apparently did not reveal the object of his search. He could have seen almost everything and everybody else. He passed, in his hurried walk back and forth, beautiful women who would have been glad of a word from him; but they saw his distraction and smiled, for they thought they knew what he wanted. But most of these fair and indulgent creatures were mistaken.

For a long time this search, whatever might be its object, was fruitless, and John became the more nervous because people began to seize upon him, and his efforts to be agreeable, coupled with his anxiety not to become so much entangled in the mazes of a conversation that he could not break away at any moment, put him to many shifts, and made the first part of his evening anything but pleasant. A foreigner, with very good manners, harangued him on the feebleness and insincerity of American art, and the impossibility of the country's producing a painter worthy to rank with French or English artists; another, who had not only good manners but real politeness, told him anecdotes about the men he had met in the studios of Paris and London, anecdotes that would have been charming at any other time and under any other circumstances; a beautiful countess delighted him for a time with some gossip about people who were not

of the guild. He was in a circle of foreigners, who were amusing each other in French, except when, now and then, an American broke in, upon whom, if it were a man, they kindly bestowed some broken English. As John spoke French, and knew both continents, he was popular with the foreigners, who regarded him in the light of a connecting link, and as useful, although he was not really so well-informed as many of them, in clearing up doubtful points about the institutions of his own country, and the varying manners and customs of its different sections. So much interest did one newly arrived minister take in extracting from Rantoul, who was hopelessly ignorant, some information regarding the government's attitude on hoof and horn maladies, that John wished himself the silk-robed Chinaman, who stood in front of the fireplace, with his hands behind him, unconscious of the meaning of a single word of any Christian language, and, save for his big round spectacles, which imparted some intelligence to his face, looking for all the world like a benign graven image. The scene was very brilliant, the company was wonderfully interesting, and there was hardly a man or woman in the rooms not worth talking to, and yet this exacting young man had made up his mind, apparently, to be interested in nothing, unless he could find some particular person.

As he was escaping from the group of foreigners, determined to seek an obscure corner where he would be secure from demands, he stumbled over Mrs.

Holladay, who was listening with a rapt expression to the tender confidences of one of the professional male flirts of the capital. Rantoul's progress was checked by the throng that was moving through the rooms long enough to enable him to overhear the man tell the woman that for some mysterious reason he invariably felt her presence before he saw her, and that the rustle of her gown always made his heart beat with joy. Mrs. Holladay had heard these senseless outpourings very many times, but she still enjoyed them, for she had a most voracious appetite for flattery, and received gratefully all the homage, sincere or insincere, which was offered her. As she saw John she held out her hand, and the man at her side rose and moved away. There was a feeling of bitter disappointment in the young man's bosom as he yielded to his fate.

"Isn't it lovely?" asked Mrs. Holladay.

"Which; your presence, or the rustle of your gown?" asked John.

Mrs. Fanny blushed slightly as she asked in turn, "So you've been listening?"

"Not purposely; I couldn't help hearing. You needn't fear that I shall repeat what I heard, though, for I wouldn't have Mr. Holladay disturbed for the world."

Mrs. Holladay tossed her head, and there was some bitterness in her voice as she answered, "I don't understand why anything that Mr. Pollard or any one else says should disturb you."

"It doesn't," answered John; and he was at once so lost in his own reflections that, while he was conscious of the sound of his companion's voice, he did not know what she was talking about, until at last she said to him:—

"You must be very much in love." This abrupt and startling statement roused him at once, and he asked quickly, "Why do you say that?"

"Because you are no longer ordinarily polite to any woman except Marion Randolph," was the answer with which he was stabbed. Nothing that had happened during the winter had given him so much pain as this brutality. But he spoke very calmly and with much dignity when he responded, "You are entirely mistaken as to my feeling for Mrs. Randolph. There is no sentiment between us; I admire her exceedingly, — perhaps you would say, extravagantly."

"Well, it's not an affair of mine, of course; but I've known you so many years, — and — and — we were once so much to each other; it's delightful to go back over the old times, don't you think so?"

John was glad to escape from the subject of Mrs. Randolph, and responded to Mrs. Holladay's sentiment in kind, until she was again encouraged to speak of what he wanted to avoid.

"I really thought you were having a desperate flirtation with Mrs. Randolph," she said.

Rantoul saw no way out of his difficulties except by fighting down these suspicions, so he answered: "I

don't understand why you should think so. Mrs. Randolph strikes me as the last person in the world to flirt with. I fancy she could not find amusement in that sort of thing."

Mrs. Fanny shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "You are very blind, my friend; I know Marion Randolph through and through, and she is a dangerous woman. She always has a man in tow. Now you can go, for here comes Senator Markland, and I want to talk to him. If you are anxious to see your divinity, I've no doubt that you'll find her in a quiet corner of the library."

John was moving away sore and wounded, although happy at his regained freedom; but the senator stopped him to say something pleasant about his work in Mrs. Holladay's house, to which John murmured his thanks, but was in such evident haste that the considerate old man did not continue the conversation. "Not a very interesting person," he suggested, as he sank into the chair beside Mrs. Holladay.

But the younger man did not care what his elder thought of him, for now he was determined to find Marion Randolph if she were in the house. He went again through the drawing-rooms and then into the library, which was on the other side of the hall, and in whose retired quietness there were a few people separated into groups, each group consisting of a man and a woman. The pain which Rantoul had felt when Mrs. Holladay struck him with all her

feminine brutality was nothing compared with the bitterness of the sight that now greeted him, for here was Mrs. Randolph engaged apparently in the most confidential of conversations with the male flirt who had been telling Mrs. Holladay how deeply he was moved by her beauty.

As John approached the two, Mrs. Randolph was saying merrily, "No, I am very exacting, and I must insist on receiving a man's entire devotion. I cannot divide with any one."

John did not hear the man's response, for it was uttered in a very low tone, but Pollard's manner was as impressive as his insincere nature could make it. John wished a thousand times that he had not heard these words and that he had not seen the two together. But Mrs. Randolph welcomed him very cordially, telling him that she had been wondering why he had not made his appearance before. Pollard was not inclined to give way a second time to the man whom he now thought he had reason to regard as his general rival. Therefore he kept this seat, and, evidently expected John's conversation to be a temporary matter, while he looked as though the interruption were not at all to his taste. John had no talent for out-staying other men, and was fast becoming hopeless and despondent, and making up his mind that life in general, and this evening in particular, were failures, when Mrs. Randolph rose, and asked him to take her out for a cup of tea. She was in an exceptionally gay mood, yet her high spirits produced the

directly opposite effect on John, who, the brighter and more mirthful she was, became more and more gloomy. Finally he said, "You seem extraordinarily happy."

"Why shouldn't I be happy?" she answered, "I came here to be."

"You must have discovered a peculiarly rich source of pleasure." He said this with a good deal of bitterness; and with a recklessness born of the feeling that the world held nothing good. Mrs. Randolph looked at him with surprise; apparently she had not noticed his dejection."

"It's evident," she said, "that I shall not remain happy very long unless I find some one more agreeable to talk with. I am sorry I left Mr. Pollard."

"He must be interesting to you: he's a wonderfully clever person."

"He's amusing at any rate; and it's a good deal better, in such a place as this, to be shallow and amusing, than clever and disagreeable."

John had no sooner begun this unfortunate conversation, than he wished himself out of it; as he was not able to find a retreat, however, he surrendered unconditionally, saying, "Please don't go on; I'm not at all happy to-night. I'm in a very bad mood, and ought not to have come here."

Upon hearing this, Mrs. Randolph became at once compassionate, and before they parted, John's woes were somewhat softened. But they returned with renewed force after he reached his rooms. He

asked himself, first, why he had been thus tortured. Was he a victim of jealousy? And if he were, did not that mean that he was in love with Mrs. Randolph? It ought not to disturb him if she amused herself with the vaporings of Pollard; and yet it had unnerved him to that extent that he could not think; he could only nurse his bitterness and his distress. At times he almost convinced himself that, as Mrs. Randolph's friend, he had the right to protest against the feeble and fickle adoration of such a worthless creature as Pollard. He argued with himself, and determined that he was simply jealous of the reputation of a woman who ought to be above holding any relations with so frivolous a person; he feared that she would not be seen by the world in her true dignity. Then it occurred to him that Mr. Randolph did not object; that, in truth, he seemed to offer no opposition to anything his wife saw fit to do, being content to take her out, to wait patiently until she was ready to go home, and to sacrifice his comfort whenever doing so would bring her pleasure. He was never jealous; but then, John thought, he does not love her as — There it was again; what right had he to think of love of Marion Randolph? Did he love her? Again he insisted, fiercely, that he did not, but all his insistence did not prevent his agony over the cruel confirmation which Fanny Holladay's words had, apparently, received. Was this woman, upon whom he had looked with trembling adoration, — whose great self-

respect had been as clear to him as her beauty, — was she, after all, a deft, and dangerous, and idle trifler? Was she so weak that the stupid and inane flatteries of Pollard satisfied her? And then her merry laughter, and her light tones and careless words, rang in his ears, and mocked his image of her. He went on magnifying the trifling incident in the library, making a jest and a laugh the evidence of heartless insincerity. Long afterward he recalled this exaggeration, and was heartily ashamed of himself, but on this night he was utterly wretched.

While he was wrestling with himself, sometimes resolving to dismiss the woman entirely from his mind, and then earnestly trying to find some consolation from the events of the evening, especially from the last minutes just before he bade her good-night, he heard Scolly's footsteps on the stair. He went hurriedly into his room and closed the door, for he dreaded to see the happy lover, and the man who had once before spoken lightly to him while he was suffering tortures. Thus it was that every time his will let go its hold, and his true feeling found expression, there was an admission of his love for Mrs. Randolph.

When morning came he was worn out by a sleepless night, but he had determined to take an important step. He would not confess that he was hopelessly in love, but the bitterness of his anguish, the doubt that had been planted in his mind, told him that he must not remain in danger. He saw himself

face to face with a broken, hopeless, life, and he resolved to never again see Mrs. Randolph.

When Scolly made his appearance in the sitting-room, John was packing. "What's up now?" said the cheerful philosopher.

"I'm going to Boston," answered John.

"Sudden move, isn't it? When will you be back?"

"Not at all."

Scolly stopped short in his walk across the room; his face grew serious; and he looked long and anxiously at his friend.

"What has happened, Rantoul?" he finally said.

"Oh, nothing; I'm through, and I'm going."

"Well — but — but you haven't paid your farewell visits, and, by Jove, you haven't said anything to me about it."

"Look here, Scolly, do me a favor; pay my visits for me, and don't ask me why I'm going. I can't tell you the truth about it, and I won't tell you, of all men, anything else. It's not discreditable to me," he added.

"You needn't tell me that, old man; and if you don't want to tell me, don't; I know," he went on hurriedly, seeing that John thought him reproachful, "I know you'd tell me if you told any one. Can't I do anything for you? You must leave something unfinished. You're going off in such a deuce of a hurry."

Yes, he could do something; he could see to the

delivery of some notes, to the settlement of some bills, and to the saying of a few good-byes. Among the notes was one to Mrs. Randolph. It was as follows : —

MY DEAR MRS. RANDOLPH : —

I must go to Boston in a great hurry and without seeing you again, so that this note will be my farewell. I hope that I may meet you again; but in the mean time, I want to tell you that I owe to you the happiest and the most fruitful days of my life. Good-by. Please remember me kindly to Mr. Randolph.

Yours very sincerely,

JOHN RANTOUL.

When Mrs. Randolph read this note she handed it to her husband, who said, "Strange creature; did he say anything to you last night about going away?"

"No."

"You saw him, didn't you?"

"For a very short time."

"Still, I think he might have been courteous enough" —

"He says that he goes in a great hurry."

CHAPTER XVI.

DOES SHE RECOGNIZE HIS LOVE?

THE news of John Rantoul's sudden departure was received by Miss Linthicomb with surprise and distress. The two had been very good friends since their first meeting at Mt. Desert, and Agnes even fancied that she had intuitions about John.

Their relations had been outwardly much more intimate than those of Mrs. Randolph and John. They had seen more of one another, and they knew more of the daily ordering of each other's lives. John knew what Agnes hoped for and what she proposed; where she would be next week, or the following summer; whom she liked or disliked, her place in the domestic economy of the Linthicombs, and all that was within the knowledge of any one besides herself. In her turn Agnes knew better than Mrs. Randolph or any one else the surface of John Rantoul's nature. The other woman, however, knew one thing, the great ambition of the man, and his most secret thoughts about his own career,—which only two persons in the world ever dreamed of,—the man himself and the woman from whom he fled. Singularly enough, Mrs. Randolph possessed very little information concerning John, aside from his intel-

lectual and professional existence. Although she had been told of his early career, she could not have said on what particular part of the Massachusetts coast he was born, or why she felt that his father was to be dreaded and disliked, or for what reason she had pictured his mother as a beautiful, gentlewoman, whose bitter experience had not hardened her, but whose tender loveliness made her worthy of the adoration which she received from her son. She knew his mind, his thoughts, his dearest aspirations, and she knew, too, that these last had been stimulated, if not awakened, by her.

The intimacy between John and Agnes had grown from the time when he discovered that her hair resembled his dead aunt's beautiful red-gold locks. He had studied and tried to paint that rare color over and over again, but Agnes Linthcomb was his living model; and it was before the end of that pleasant and eventful visit to Mt. Desert that he began unconsciously to look upon this then recent acquaintance as he might have regarded a very companionable member of his own family. Therefore when he ran away from Washington, without any further notice than to burst in upon her with the sudden announcement of his purpose, saying only good-by, without adding any explanation, — for he had driven around by the Linthicomb house on his way to the train, — Agnes was sorely distressed and half inclined to be indignant.

"I presume this is to be taken as another evidence

of his genius," she said to Scolly, when they were discussing the flight.

"Well, really, for my part I don't know any genius that takes the place of a genius for good manners."

"I don't think you can say that John Rantoul hasn't good manners." Miss Linthicomb did not desire an ally, not even in the person of her affianced lover, in any offensive warfare which she might see fit to wage against John Rantoul, and she already regretted the petulance of her remark.

"Well, really, Agnes, I don't see how you can defend a man who runs away from his friends as though they were his enemies; and who hasn't the decency to wait a day or two to say good-by to the people who have treated him so well all winter. It isn't proper."

"Ordinary rules of politeness are not made for men like John Rantoul; they are for ordinary people like you and me, aren't they?" Miss Linthicomb did not propose to have an argument on this subject with Scolly. He was master of that at least; and she was of the number of wise virgins who recognize that men may be managed the more easily in matters of importance when they are permitted to have their own way about trifles.

"I've no doubt," Scolly at last confessed, — for he had not spoken his true sentiments when he criticized John's conduct, — "I've no doubt that Rantoul did the perfectly proper thing when he went away in a hurry, and, well, as you may say informally."

"You're right about his departure being informal," said Agnes, whose eyes were wide open with surprise ; "but what do you know about his motive for — for — flight."

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Then how can a well-balanced philosopher say that he did the perfectly proper thing?"

"He assured me that it was proper."

"Assured you ! without telling you why?"

"Certainly ; I took his word for that as I would for anything else."

"But it seems to me that this is a question of judgment ; and how can you expect to go on living in Boston if you profess a blind faith in any man's judgment?" Miss Linthicomb's anxiety to know why John had run away could not overcome her inclination to jest. But Scolly did not appreciate gibes at the worshipful institutions of his native city, so he answered rather stiffly, "I should think, Agnes, that you would recognize the impropriety of inquiring into the soundness of a man's judgment concerning his private affairs."

The young woman leaned over, put her hand on her lover's arm, and looked up at him with so much affection and admiration, — although there was just a suspicion of mirthfulness lingering in her eyes — that Scolly could not resist the temptation to kiss her.

At last Agnes said, "I do not question anything you have said. I am only too glad when you trust John as you seem to."

Scolly looked serious for a moment, and then answered, "I did not know that you were so deeply interested in Rantoul."

Agnes did not notice — at least she did not appear to notice — her lover's constrained tone. "Oh! how could you be mistaken? For a time, John Rantoul was dearer to me than any man I knew," she said.

Scolly felt as if his heart were made of lead. He could not understand. Miss Linthicomb had known John and himself the same length of time, and that was hardly sufficient to cover two love affairs. The young woman seemed to be mocking him, to be defiantly parading her own fickleness, and she made matters worse by going on: "I think more of him now than of any other man, except you."

"What you say rather astonishes me, Agnes; how dear is Mr. Rantoul to you?" Scolly wanted everything well defined.

Miss Linthicomb assumed a reflective air, as if she were measuring the exact length, breadth, and thickness of her affection for John Rantoul, and slowly and thoughtfully said, "Let me see! well about as dear — as — as," then breaking into a merry laugh, added, "as a cousin."

Scolly felt that he had been imposed upon and defrauded of his well-grounded jealousy, but finally yielded to his better nature and his love.

"Do you remember that delightful afternoon on the porch?" Miss Linthicomb asked suddenly.

"I have spent a good many such afternoons on the porch; which one do you mean?"

"How dull you are!" said the young woman; "you ought to know which one I mean."

"Well, I don't—unless you mean the afternoon when"—

"Of course I do, the afternoon when I found the crocuses."

"It would be very hard to forget that afternoon."

"Wouldn't it, dear?" Again there was an interrupting episode in which no one can be interested except those who participated.

"Do you remember a question I asked?" Agnes finally went on.

"I can't think just now," Scolly said slowly; "somehow or other my interest in that afternoon centres in a question which I asked."

"That question was very well in its way, and I continue to appreciate its importance; but,"—and here she abandoned her merry mood, "I mean the question that led to all the others."

Scolly shook his head; the delights which followed seemed to have driven their immediate cause out of his memory; but suddenly he brightened up and exclaimed, "Oh, yes; certainly I do! You mean your inquiry as to the possibility of a man's falling in love with a married woman, and keeping it from her?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"Well, what has all that to do with what we're talking about?"

"What are we talking of?"

"Why, of the degree of affection you entertain for John Ran" — He did not finish the sentence; Miss Linthicomb interrupted him, saying, "No, that is not the subject we began with. We were talking of the reason for John's going away."

All the merriment fled from her eyes, and a look of sadness took its place.

"Do you think" — he began — "no, no; it can't be that."

Then, for a moment, there was silence, which was broken by Agnes, who said, "When I asked you that apparently idle question, which was so quickly turned to your — to our advantage that I forgot why I asked it, I was almost convinced of what I am now sure."

"What is that?" Scolly was interested, and spoke quickly and nervously.

"I know that John Rantoul loves Marion Randolph."

Nothing that could have been said to Scolly would have produced such an effect on him. For a long time he did not speak, but looked intently at Agnes, as if questioning her sincerity, or the soundness of her judgment. He could not believe this of his friend, but he saw that Miss Linthicomb was convinced of the truth of every word which she had uttered. At last he asked: —

"May you not be mistaken?"

"I do not think so; I have watched her influence over him for a long time, and I have seen his love grow despite all his efforts to fight against it."

"But this is very bad, Agnes; do you suppose, —no, he certainly would not tell her of his love." Then he asked again, "What evidence have you?"

"Nothing but my observation."

"And what is that?"

"Just this, he is never completely happy now except when he is with her. When he is away from her he finds contentment only in his work, and he finds it there because she has inspired him to devote himself to his art, and he feels that every successful stroke of his brush gives her pleasure. She has changed him from an idle dreamer to a determined and ambitious man."

"Is this all?" Scolly asked.

"It's enough," was the reply, "but I have read his love for her in his face, and I have almost heard it confessed by him. Besides, my intuitions, that are always right about John Rantoul, tell me that I'm not mistaken."

While Scolly was greatly disturbed by what Miss Linthicomb told him, he was not accustomed to looking very far under the surface for motives; and temporary excitement, or impulsiveness, or a sudden desire to be at home would have accounted to him for John's departure, if his friend had not told him that he could not give him the reason for his

going. Even that would not have caused him much concern if it had not been followed by Miss Linthicomb's recital of her belief that John loved Mrs. Randolph, and by his recollection of the eventful night when he rushed out of the house to escape a jest about her; so it was with a heavy heart that Scolly continued the conversation.

"I suppose your inquiry then is about Rantoul?"

"You mean my question as to whether a man in love with a woman can help telling her?"

"Yes."

"Yes, he is the man I am thinking of. When I asked the question first I had no idea that he had told her, but I was wondering if he could keep his secret to himself."

"What is your opinion now?"

"I am afraid."

"Afraid that he has spoken to her?" Scolly asked this question incredulously, for he could not believe that John Rantoul would be guilty of this. Scolly always took the athletic view, holding that a man can do anything with himself, and that it is as easy for a lover to refrain from declaring his passion as it is for a hungry man to fast. It seemed to him that the moral law that none but unmarried men and women should fall in love with each other was a good and sound regulation, and he could not understand how any man with a healthy heart could permit it to beat illegally, or how any woman with a due sense of propriety could be swept

away from the moorings to which society had lashed her.

"Yes," answered Agnes to his last question, "I am afraid that John has betrayed himself to Marion, and that is the reason of his sudden departure."

"Your suspicions are cruelly unjust, Agnes; you do not know Rantoul as I do, or you would never say that. He is altogether too much of a man to forget himself in the way you have suggested."

"I can have no feeling towards John Rantoul," answered Miss Linthcomb, "that is not kindly. I know that he loves Marion Randolph, and I am afraid he has told her of his love, because I know his frankness, his impulsiveness, and that his feelings are always stronger than his will."

"You know a good deal more about him than I do, then."

"Yes, I think I do."

"Well," finally said Scolly, with the impatient air of a man who wants to get to the end of a subject, to reach a conclusion one way or the other, "if he has made a fool of himself, it is evident that he has been driven off. The only result that I see is, he has lost a very pleasant acquaintance."

"I imagine he will suffer for it all his life; that's what I'm thinking of."

"Well, I'm sorry for the poor fellow. He's the best friend I ever knew. I suppose this will put an end to his ambition for a time, and he'll stop painting pictures."

"Not if I can help it."

"What! Why, what can you do about it?"

"I don't know yet."

In all this conversation there had been no suggestion that Marion Randolph returned John's love for her. Miss Linthicomb, who knew her better than any one else, did not once think of the possibility of her friend's heart swerving for an instant from its fealty to her husband, while Scolly, if he had been brought to confess his true belief of Mrs. Randolph, would have said that she had never been in love and never could be; that she was beautiful, but as cold as a statue, and that her deepest feeling was one of moderate friendliness for all who admired her, as many men and women did.

When Miss Linthicomb asked Mrs. Randolph why John had quitted Washington so suddenly, that beautiful woman simply answered:—

"I cannot tell; he sent me a little note saying that he had to go to Boston."

"And cannot you guess?"

"No, my dear; I'm not enough of a Yankee."

Miss Linthicomb did not believe that Mrs. Randolph was insensible of John's feeling for her, so she continued to talk of his departure and to suggest reasons for it, but the elder woman persisted in her refusal to know anything more, or to surmise anything more than all the world might see and know, until Agnes, somewhat out of patience, said, "Is not John Rantoul more to you than most friends?"

The question meant more to Mrs. Randolph than the speaker intended. Questions would often be differently framed if one could see the dormant thought which they must surely awaken. She resented this as an intrusion into her most sacred privacy, although Miss Linthicomb had really only meant to ask if John were not one of her nearest friends.

"I like Mr. Rantoul very much," Mrs. Randolph finally answered, "but I hardly know what your question means."

"Why," said Miss Linthicomb, "I mean that you don't seem to care that he is gone."

"Indeed, I do care. I have not only liked him, but I am wonderfully interested in him; and I am very, very sorry that it was impossible that he should remain here."

"Why was it impossible?"

Mrs. Randolph was calm and dignified, and Miss Linthicomb felt keenly her own inferiority. She awoke suddenly to the consciousness that, without recognizing it, she had been guided and controlled by the unworthy assumption that this woman had led John Rantoul on to his doom; and when she heard the answer, "I really cannot tell you that, Agnes," she was convinced that Mrs. Randolph was reading her inmost thoughts, and despising her for them. She was humiliated by the discovery of her involuntary distrust of a woman whom she had so long regarded as the most womanly of all her acquaint-

ances, and she wondered at her temerity in questioning her.

The two remained silent for some time, after Mrs. Randolph's cool answer. The younger woman's face betrayed her disturbed mind, and Mrs. Randolph, having sufficiently resented the tone of the last question, and having no more dread of inquiry, said : —

"Come here, dear, I want you nearer me."

There was a quick look of joy in the girl's eyes, as she heard these words. Mrs. Randolph motioned her to a seat by her side, but she took, instead, a footstool, and, sitting at the feet of her friend and exemplar, looked up into her eyes, while her face was lighted with happiness. Mrs. Randolph held Agnes's hand in her own, as she said very kindly : —

"You seem disturbed by Mr. Rantoul's going away."

"I am."

"I want you to tell me why, dear ; won't you be frank with me, and tell me just what you think?"

It had been Agnes's intention to say precisely what had been asked of her, but now that she was in Mrs. Randolph's presence she found it difficult to tell her friend what was on her mind. It was not because she was moved by idle curiosity that she desired to know whether John Rantoul had confessed his love ; but she thought that if he had gone away from Washington without betraying himself the chance of his recovery was better. From her point of view, she could not understand how he could retain his

self-respect after telling Mrs. Randolph that he loved her ; for she was sure that his declaration, if it had been made, was received in a manner which must have humiliated him. This was her real belief, although a momentary petulance had almost prepared her to think that Mrs. Randolph had willingly made John her victim. Her reason, however, was now entirely restored, and with it returned her purpose to find out, first, how far John had been overcome by his passion, and, if he had said nothing of it, to do her utmost to help him. She wanted to hear that he had been silent, thinking that in that event there was hope for him. Now, however, that she was with Mrs. Randolph, even though she was urged to say precisely what she longed to give utterance to, she hesitated and was abashed. Even to mention her suspicion seemed a profanation.

At last Mrs. Randolph said to her : —

“ Agnes, if you love me as you say you do, I am sure that you will tell me what you think about this. I know you believe that I have had something to do with Mr. Rantoul’s going away ; don’t you ? ”

Agnes answered this by asking, “ Haven’t you had anything to do with his leaving Washington ? ”

“ Not that I am aware of. ” Mrs. Randolph’s voice and manner convinced Agnes that John had gone away without revealing his love.

“ And can you really not conjecture why he has gone away ? ”

Mrs. Randolph's glance at Agnes was searching ; she seemed to be making a mental inquiry as to whether she had better say anything more than had already escaped her. At last she laughed pleasantly and, patting Agnes's cheek fondly, answered : —

"I have already told you that I can't tell ; but, if you must know, I have a surmise ; now, let that end it, and don't continue to be exacting."

"But, Marion, I am very sorry for John Rantoul."

"And so am I ; but he's been very manly, and I've no doubt that his troubles will soon be over."

As Agnes was going away, she turned back to ask : —

"Do you suppose you will ever see him again?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Randolph answered, and she added falteringly, and after a moment's reflection, "I hope not."

CHAPTER XVII.

MOTHER AND SON. — THE CONSPIRACY DEVELOPS.

ALTHOUGH John fled from his temptation he did not find rest or consolation either in Boston or in Stonecliff, whither he went soon after reaching home. He had a vague feeling that his mother might afford him some comfort; and therefore he went to her. Mrs. Rantoul had grown older in appearance by more than the six months which had elapsed since John had last seen her. Her hair was grayer, and there were downward-tending lines in her face, which indicated a winter of more than ordinary hardship. In truth, the doctor had been very morose, and at times he was positively harsh and cruel, not being content with his usual silent sullenness, but breaking out into violent bursts of passion in which his wife was accused of responsibility for John's infidelity to his ancestral profession and for what the doctor called "the boy's worthlessness." When he heard of his son's departure for Washington for the purpose of decorating Mrs. Holladay's house, he broke into grim irony, saying, "Well, it's better'n I thought. I told ye once that house paintin's better'n coverin' cotton cloth with figgers; but I didn't suppose John would come to

his senses so soon. Still I don't know as hevin' a house-painter in the family's much to brag on. Leastways, the Rantouls don't feel honored. I can't tell how the Davises look at it."

Mrs. Rantoul's chief cause of grief, however, was not her husband's ill-nature; she had long ago made up her mind that it was as much part of nature's economy as the New-England winter and the north-east storms; but she was full of sorrow because of John's growing success, — sorrow and pride. The world never saw the one, but it heard of the other. The pride in her boy's achievements did not sustain her against the insidious, wearing, concealed grief that was making her old before her time. She feared that prosperity and its attendant demands, in the way of work to sustain it and of distractions growing out of it, would continue to keep him from her side. When the studio in Boston was taken she imagined that his wanderings were over, and she pictured to herself many happy days spent with him, — days that would greatly compensate her for their frequent and long separations; but those happy days had not yet begun, and apparently were never to be. Moreover, Mrs. Rantoul was firmly convinced that John was in love. Of the fact itself she had no doubt. She read it in his letters to her from Washington, — letters that were very dear to her and only too infrequent, — and she determined, naturally, that Agnes Linthicomb was the object of his affections. The thought of his marrying added to her

sorrow for a time ; it made the future a blank until hope once more took the place of despair ; in other words, until Mrs. Rantoul reasoned that marriage would settle John permanently in Boston, where she might enjoy both him and his family. The news that Agnes Linthicomb was engaged to Scolly was a shock to her, for she was certain that now her son's life would be permanently embittered. She longed to see him with a feverish longing, and was very much worried that he remained in Washington after the faithless Scolly had won the prize she was sure ought to have been John's. She entreated him again and again to come to her, and when, on reaching Boston, he stopped for two days in the city instead of coming directly to Stonecliff, she believed that he must be actually beside himself with grief.

When he did come they were wonderfully congenial, and John was evidently so much soothed by her presence that the good woman was more at peace with herself and with the world than she had been since those bright days in the neighboring city when she was helping the young artist prepare his workshop and his home.

One day, when they were seated under the shadow of their favorite boulder, she ventured to ask him about his plans for the immediate future. She had desired to do this from the first, but she was fearful of his answer, and had therefore refrained.

"Will you work in Boston next winter, John?" she asked.

His head was in her lap, and her gentle fingers were playing with his hair. It was some time before he answered, with a sigh : —

“ Yes, mother, and I shall work very hard if you will spend the winter with me.”

The young man did not see the happiness which this answer gave his mother, but he perceived it in the nervous trembling of her fingers as they strayed more quickly through his hair. She was sure that he needed her now more than ever, and she was glad that she would be able to relieve his disappointment and increase her own happiness at the same time.

“ I am glad you think you need me,” she said ; “ I hope the time will never come when you will not think so.”

“ Why should I not always need the truest friend I ever had ?”

The mother found a good deal of hidden meaning in these words. Her boy had gone out into the world and had tried other friendships, and even another love, but he had come back to the woman whose life had been a sacrifice for him, confessing at last that her love was the dearest, and her friendship the truest of all. It would have made John’s heart bound with delight if he had realized the exquisite pleasure which he was unconsciously giving his mother. He knew, indeed, that his words carried happiness to her by the tokens which have already been spoken of, but he did not begin to know how great her joy really was.

"Yet you have accomplished a good deal this winter without me?" she went on.

"Yes, I have had a wonderful inspiration, mother." When he said this he took her hand and pressed it, as if he wished to let her know that he could not express the greatness of that inspiration. Mrs. Rantoul believed that he was alluding to his love for Agnes Linthicomb, and her tender heart was wrung by the thought of her boy's sorrow. As she kissed his forehead, a tear fell on his cheek, and, hastily rising, he saw his mother wiping away the tell-tales of her heart.

"Why," he exclaimed, "what are you grieving for, my dear mother?"

The only answer he received was a look full of compassion, and, —

"Cannot your mother be your inspiration, now?"

"You are to be the preserver of my inspiration, dear; the inspiration has been given me, and I'm sure that it will remain if you will spend the winter with me; say you will, will you not?"

"I will try to, my boy; but your father" —

John had utterly forgotten this member of the family; now he saw him plainly enough standing, after his fashion, in the way of his happiness; but it was finally agreed that if the doctor's assent could be obtained, Mrs. Rantoul should spend the winter in Boston.

One day when the two were together, as usual, on the downs overlooking the sea, John said to his mother:

"Why does Basswood haunt father so much?"

Now this was a matter over which Mrs. Rantoul thought a good deal, and she had a pretty definite belief as to the reason for the mysterious union between her husband and the crafty lawyer, whom she disliked with all a good woman's intensity when a thoroughly bad man is the object of her hostility. John, however, was about the last person in the world to whom she wanted to breathe her suspicions, for the principal result of her loyalty to the doctor was the determination to preserve for him as much as possible of John's respect. Therefore she answered:—

"You know the doctor tells me very little about his business. I suppose, with all his transactions, he must have need of a lawyer nearly all the time."

"I suppose so," answered John, whose ideas about business were very crude and ill-defined; "but I wish he had a different lawyer. That fellow Basswood throws suspicion on everything he touches; he would do the bidding of the saints after the methods of the devil."

"I don't like Basswood any more than you do; but, as we can't influence your father, why discuss his business?"

"I'm sure I don't want to discuss his business; he and I parted company on that matter more than six years ago; but I can't help being surprised at his taste. He seems to have taken that fellow, Persons, into his confidence, too."

"Did Josiah Persons see a good deal of you in Washington this winter?" asked his mother.

"Well, he saw quite as much of me as I wanted him to," answered John, good-naturedly.

"The doctor thinks him a very promising young man," continued Mrs. Rantoul.

The doctor had not only confided this view of Persons to Mrs. Rantoul, but, as may be supposed, he had contrasted his own son very unfavorably with the lawyer, who had risen to be a trial-justice, and whose attention to the requisite duties of citizenship and church-membership was both regular and conspicuous.

John laughed when his mother told him what the doctor had said about Persons, for he did not in the least envy his old comrade this good opinion of him; on the contrary, he said:—

"I'm sure I'm glad to hear that father has expressed a good opinion of any one; it will do him good, and I hope it will not harm Persons."

Mrs. Rantoul was profoundly sorry that she had said anything to call forth this remark, and she replied gravely:—

"John, remember that he is your father, at all events."

"My dear mother," replied the young man, looking at her tenderly, and putting his arm about her waist, "I don't think he deserved to be; but let's change the subject. Has Persons told you anything about his visit?"

"He has never told me anything."

"Have you heard of anything that he has said?"

"My dear boy, don't let's talk about Josiah Persons; it's not worth while."

"I know it's not, on general principles, mother; but just now I want to learn something. I suppose that he was not very complimentary to me, said I was a snob, and all that. Was there anything more?"

"What is the use, John, of going over all which that man's malicious tongue has uttered? Yes, he said substantially what you suppose."

The good woman was concealing something from her son, for Persons had not only spread abroad sneering tales of John's life in fashionable society, but he had darkly hinted at dissipations, not making direct charges, but alluding to his association with worldly people, — a phrase which covers everything short of penal offences, to certain village folk whose knowledge of the world is based on suspicion, distrust, jealousy, and introspection. The stories troubled Mrs. Rantoul very slightly; for she knew both their author and their subject. She refrained from telling John, simply because she did not want to infuse hatred into his genial nature.

"But what are you trying to learn, John?" Mrs. Rantoul continued.

The young man was far away in dreamy contemplation, and did not answer at once. When he did find his voice he spoke quickly, as if just becoming conscious of his mother's question.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but did you speak?"

"Yes," answered his mother, "I spoke some time ago."

Mrs. Rantoul's momentary jealousy of her son's abstraction was dissipated in a moment by John's affectionate and rather hearty demonstrations, and she repeated her question.

"What am I trying to learn?" he answered.

"Yes; you said you were trying to learn something."

"About what?"

"I don't know; about Josiah Persons I suppose; for he was the subject of our conversation."

"Oh, yes!"

Then the young man plunged again in thought until his mother awakened him by exclaiming:—

"Well!"

"I'm thinking about it, mother, I really don't know just what I am trying to learn; but I have a suspicion."

"About what or whom — about Persons?"

"Yes; I've a fancy that I was in some way connected with his visit to Washington."

"I hardly understand you," said his mother; and yet, even as she said this, it was evident that John's words troubled her.

"I mean, my dear, that I have all along imagined that father and Persons have some business together which affects me."

John thus persisted in talking on a subject which

of all others his mother wished to avoid. Mrs. Rantoul had reason to believe that she knew the business in which her husband was concerned with Basswood and Persons. The disappearance of Mary Pickering had been one of her chief causes of grief, for she had never accepted the doctor's theory that the girl was dead, and, besides, she had always suspected her husband's good faith. During the winter which had just passed she had seen a good deal of Basswood. The lawyer had come frequently to her house, and, evening after evening, had been closeted with the doctor in his office, which was a small detached one-storied building, about fifty feet from the dwelling-house. Mrs. Rantoul was disturbed by these mysterious visits, although generally she had very little curiosity concerning the doctor's affairs.

One evening, when the doctor was out on a professional visit, Basswood, not finding him in his office, went to the house to inquire after him, and, discovering Mrs. Rantoul at home alone, sat down to be neighborly, he said, but really with the intention of learning how much the doctor's wife knew or suspected about Mary Pickering. He uttered a good many truisms about the weather, and concerning this or that neighbor, until he finally edged the talk to the subject of his hostess's "folks," which he found very abruptly concluded when he musingly said, "Strange 'bout Mary, aint it?" This was a subject on which Mrs. Rantoul never talked, and Basswood was sharp enough to understand at once that he had best not

attempt any further investigation in that direction. At first he was nonplussed, not knowing whether to believe that Mrs. Rantoul had suspicions of the doctor, or knowledge of the girl's whereabouts, or to regard her reticence as evidence of her great sorrow for the loss of the child, to whom she had been devotedly attached. The more he thought over her manner and her character the more he concluded that, if she had any suspicion of the truth, she could not have been so dignified and cold as she was when he threw out his "fish-hooks of conversation," but that she would have betrayed herself by some outward sign of agitation. Basswood was not so good a master of feminine character as of masculine. Besides the suggestion of this conversation, Mrs. Rantoul overheard Basswood tell the doctor one evening that he was not as sure of Mary Pickering's property as he might be, and from that time dated her husband's increased moroseness.

In truth the doctor was greatly harried. He realized that Basswood suspected that the oath by means of which Mary's property was obtained was a perjury, and he saw, with concern, that Persons, for whose shrewdness he had a good deal of respect, was to be made an ally by his old enemy. His first effort was to break this dangerous combination by bribing Persons. He became the young man's political sponsor, forwarded his ambitions, and occasionally put him in the way of earning a professional dollar or so ; but Basswood could not be circumvented

in this way, and, while he enthusiastically seconded all the doctor's endeavors in the young lawyer's behalf, he took care that Persons should look upon the advantages he reaped as due to the alliance with himself, and as so much gained from their common victim. Moreover he kept stirring the fires of Persons's jealousy of John, and of his cupidity for the money-reward that would surely come to the conspirators whenever Mary Pickering was found. So the doctor ascertained that he could not break the compact which he felt, rather than knew, had been formed against him, and his anxiety was not only souring and embittering him, but it was undermining his health, and the old people of Stonecliff were astonished by the signs of physical decay which made their appearance. They had never seen so old and broken a Rantoul of seventy years of age. His nervous dread that some misfortune and exposure were hanging over him was greatly increased when Persons suddenly quitted Stonecliff for the South, especially as Basswood, when the doctor approached him on the subject, intimated that he had heard news which, "if true," said he, looking significantly at the doctor, "will be mighty important to me'n you." When Persons returned home Basswood was overjoyed by the success of the mission, although, in view of the possible failure of the scheme, he grumbled because Persons had not himself gone to Texas, to see Strand's mother. Still the two

worthies continued to work on the doctor's fears by hints which made the old tyrant's life a burden to him, notwithstanding that he attempted to maintain an independent air, avoiding making any inquiries of them, but trying to wait patiently and with resignation for the springing of the trap.

Just before John reached home Strand had written a letter to Persons. It was long and full of grandiloquence, and therefore the New England lawyer was much annoyed by it even before he reached its unsatisfactory conclusion, which hinted of a great discovery, but which also expressed the decided unwillingness of the writer to part with his information without first learning how great was to be his share of the proceeds of the conspiracy. After the fashion of their kind, Basswood and Persons endeavored to keep this matter indefinite; but Strand had improved the opportunities furnished him by his comradeship with Persons, and insisted on definite terms, which were finally reluctantly given him, but with a mental reservation.

While this correspondence was going on Basswood and Persons were constantly at the doctor's office, not revealing anything, but preparing him for a revelation. They visited him, of course, in the guise of friendship, tendering him advice as to what course he should take if Mary Pickering should ever be perverse enough to come to life, endeavoring always to impress him with the belief that he could better afford to part with half the fortune which he

had acquired by means of the girl's supposed death than to be prosecuted for perjury. The doctor generally pretended to laugh at the fears which the two professed to have, but sometimes he would break out in angry denunciation of them, and defy them to tell him the worst they knew. Then the two would regret his haste and harshness, insisting that they were his friends, and intimating that they could not repeat what they had heard, advising him to be calm, as the tale which had come to Basswood, in Stone-cliff, and for which Persons had found some confirmation in Washington, *might* — with the emphasis strongly on the *might* — turn out to be an idle and baseless rumor. Affairs were in this state when John and his mother found themselves so affected by the atmosphere in which they lived that the least-informed of the two began conjecturing about it, while the other was seized with a dread lest the end should prove disastrous to all. Mrs. Rantoul felt that something was impending, and that Mary Pickering would, in some way, be the cause of much trouble. But she wanted to spare John all knowledge of her feelings, and she answered his last remark by rallying him on his suspicions of his father, assuring him that she had no thought that Persons's visit to Washington was in any way connected with him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DISTRACTIONS OF LOVE.

JOHN'S early summer was full of work. Orders came in upon him in astonishing numbers. He was hurried from place to place to visit exacting, or possible, patrons. Some people wanted portraits, and some poems in color, and some landscapes, while one or two had the temerity to ask the artist to decorate their houses. These last were dismissed very curtly. Something had put the young man beyond the necessity of warming domestic life, and he had determined to leave that task to the clever persons whose pockets could not be replenished often enough from the sale of their pictures. If he were not mistaken he had won his spurs, and fortune was before him if he could paint fast enough; and fame, if he could paint well enough.

At first his success aroused all his ambition. For a week or two the hours were so crowded with the visits of clients, and the discussions and talk incident to his commissions, that he had very little time for the nursing of his grief. Occasionally, at night, in his loneliness, his love would come to him with overmastering strength, and he would spend hours in fruitless contest with it; but while the bustle

lasted he was able to think clearly and steadily on the occupation of the hour. As the summer wore on, however, and when the generous people who order pictures had flown away in search of comfort, John had more leisure for introspection. He found his work irksome; if he were sketching out of doors, his brush or his crayon would fall from his hand, and he would go into a dream that never came to an end, that could not be broken, and that spoiled whole days of what ought to have been useful time. Sometimes he would deliberately surrender, and spend a day in which delicious memories were sadly intermingled with hopelessness and anguish. At other times a sweet face would come between him and his canvas, and he would sit for long minutes in worship of the beauty which he believed had never been equalled. To him it was a beauty which defied analysis. It did not consist in perfection of single features, but in a splendid harmony that completely satisfied him, and made critical examination impossible. Mrs. Randolph used to say that she had not a single regular feature, but, to John, there was an atmosphere of beauty about her, and he would as soon have prodded into divinity, to see how it was made, as to ask, "Is it the soft brown hair that curls about the low white brow, or the sweet gray eye, or the wonderful fair skin, which constitutes this beauty?" In these happy visions he recalled that when he was with her, he never put his microscopic sense at work; that he stood in the noble presence,

and saw all, and no part of it; and that the woman filled his whole being with a complete sense of beauty. When he awoke from these reveries his own work seemed mean and trivial, and his day would again be gone. Still at other times a spasm of utter wretchedness would seize upon him, and he would attempt to run away from his misery. He would go to Stonecliff for a week; he would plunge into social pleasures; he would do anything to drive out the thoughts which sometimes seemed about to make him mad. Then he would think of his art, of the promise he had given, of the expectations which people had of him, and his will would conquer for a time, and he would paint strongly and worthily.

Often he wondered how all his prosperity had been brought about. Not that it was yet a great prosperity, for, though there had been much running to and fro, and many consultations, the actual orders would have seemed inconsiderable to an artist really in fashion. It was great for John, though, and so much greater than he had ever before enjoyed that he found it hard to account for. But he was too busy and too distraught to think long on such a subject, and so he easily slipped to the conclusion that the success of the picture which he had sold to the New York man, and which had attracted a good deal of favorable comment from the critics, was at the bottom of it all. He was ignorant, for many years, of the tireless industry with which Agnes Linthicomb had infused Scolly, and how that

usually indifferent young man had made friends with the critics over generous dinners, and how, having won their favor for John's picture, he had followed up their encomiums by preaching Rantoul in season and out of season, until many of his friends, with a laudable desire to be among the first to recognize rising genius, hastened to make the acquaintance of so promising a young artist. The first of these who ordered a picture was the first man who gave John a commission. He was followed by a few others, and John recognized that his opportunity had come; and, at the same time, that he was far from being in the mood to take advantage of it. During the first two months of the summer he sometimes caught himself far from the world and busy with thoughts of Mrs. Randolph, while good-natured friends or desirable patrons poured unheard advice into his heedless ears. Then he grew angry with himself, and wondered why he could not do something worthy of his love as well away from her as in her presence.

He spent many days in Stonecliff, but he found very little consolation there. He soon learned of his mother's misunderstanding of his love affair, and he was glad to know that she supposed him to be the rejected suitor of Agnes Linthicomb. He recognized how cruelly the truth would wring her tender heart, and he refrained as much as possible from mentioning Mrs. Randolph name. He felt that he could not speak it without betraying his love.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BITTER TRUTH IS HEARD AT LAST.

ONE evening John met Simeon Ballard on the street. It was the end of a day of unusual restlessness, and John was wearied in mind and body, — so wearied that he was glad of any companionship, and was prepared to listen, in sheer idleness, to any gossip which might be offered to him. Ballard had evidently something on his mind, and, after a little hemming and hawing, asked John if he had noticed the doctor's unusual intimacy with Basswood and Persons.

John's answer to this was : —

"I suppose that my father has the right to choose his own friends ; I know I choose mine."

"Yes, but don't you think it's sing'lar that he should be friends with those two?" asked Ballard.

"Perhaps ; but what business is it of mine, and what is it of yours, I'd like to know?" John was angry that this comparative stranger — for he had not seen him very often since his boyhood — should pry into family matters, which he knew had best be secret.

But Simeon Ballard felt that he was the licensed gossip of the village, and he did not propose to be

put down ; besides, he had some gratitude to exhibit. He still remembered, what John had half forgotten, that his life had once been saved by his more stalwart friend. He went on : —

“It may be a good deal more your business than you think ; ’t any rate, you needn’t be so techy.”

John regretted his harshness in a moment. He had a strong man’s pity for the cripple, and ordinarily he was as considerate of him as of a woman. Therefore he answered Ballard more softly, saying : —

“Well, Sim, if you have anything to tell me you think I ought to know, let me hear it ; I know you think too much of me to say anything intentionally that will wound me.”

Ballard was flattered by every kind word John spoke to him, and now his old eagerness returned, and he continued excitedly : —

“John, I suppose you think as much of your folks as any one does ; and I don’t suppose you like to hear stories about ’em. Blood is blood, and folks are folks, after all said and done.”

“Now look here, Sim,” broke in John, “understand me. If you’re going to repeat gossip about my father, bad or not, don’t go on ; I don’t want to hear it. You know well enough that the doctor and I never got along very well together ; but that doesn’t make me want to hear idle tales about him. So don’t go on unless some good will come of your story, — unless I can do something about whatever it is.”

"Don't be so hasty, Rantoul," replied Ballard. "I aint goin' to repeat stories about the doctor, though I have got a grudge against him. I tell you I'm telling you something for your own good."

"All right ; go on."

But Ballard hesitated about getting to the point. It was evident that the information which he had to communicate was of grave importance, in his view ; and he did not know how to begin to impart it. At last John said brusquely : —

"Do come to the point, Sim, you're as bad as the old parson."

Thus adjured, Ballard said, "Well, Rantoul, my point is just this : I believe that the doctor and those two lawyers are up to somethin' bad."

Upon hearing this John turned fiercely upon the cripple : —

"Ballard, do you know what you are accusing my father of ? He hasn't given me much occasion for affection for him ; but don't think that I can listen to such tales as that, and not resent them."

"Wait a little, Rantoul ; don't be so all-fired fast. Of course what I said came on you sudden like, and must have surprised you ; but I'm talking for your own good, and on the advice of one of your best friends."

"Who is that best friend who has advised you to come to me with the story that my father has committed a crime, or is about to commit one?"

"That's putting it pretty plain, and in pretty hard

words ; but it's about the size of it," said Ballard. "The friend who advised me to speak to you is Captain Symonds."

This put a more serious aspect on the matter. If the cool and cautious Symonds had advised Ballard to approach him on this delicate subject John thought there must be something to listen to, and he at once suggested that they go to the captain's house.

The captain lived at the other end of the village, and the walk seemed long. John wondered what new trouble was coming into his life, for he did not doubt for a moment that he was to hear a story which would show him his father in colors blacker than he had ever painted him. He had known the doctor as hard and cruel, without affection for his wife or son, or for any human being ; he had recognized, under the stern outward show of propriety, a man who would be false to a friend for the sake of gain ; but, in this respect, he had not looked upon him as exceptional in the community in which he lived. He had supposed that the old man was just and generous, according to the standard of justice and generosity of the people about him. He liked to overreach a neighbor in a trade ; but the talent to accomplish that was esteemed in Stonecliff. But now John saw the possibility of a discovery which he shrank from. He hastened to the captain's house, and yet he hoped that the old fisherman would be out. He trembled to think that his father

might be on the brink of some horrible exposure. It was useless for him to try to console himself with the reflection that the tale he was about to hear might be only the narration of an exceptionally sharp business transaction. He knew that Symonds and Ballard would have applauded the doctor for a good trade, no matter how perilously near his conduct might have approached criminality. Equally unsuccessful was his attempt to convince himself that the two lawyers might have pushed the doctor to financial extremities. John knew that, in a business game, his father was more than a match for both of them. No; it had all to revert to the first fearful suspicion. When Ballard said he believed that the three men were "up to something bad" he used the vernacular of the region to express his suspicion that crime had been, or was about to be, committed. John put the correct interpretation on the cripple's language. Ballard regarded "something bad," bad enough to be grave and serious over, as a deed calling for the intervention of the criminal law. Apprehension and conviction make the worst offence that one can be guilty of in certain communities, and Ballard thought that these twin sisters of fate were threatening Dr. Rantoul.

John walked so fast that the cripple had great difficulty in keeping up with him, but he was too much impressed with the dignity of his mission, and too desirous of maintaining the importance of the council about to be held in Captain Symonds's parlor,

to induce John to walk more slowly, by offering his information prematurely.

When the captain's house was reached it was evident to John that the interview was expected. The old fisherman had on his Sunday suit, and the every-day twinkle in his eye had given way to the solemnity of his church-going manner. After a good many exasperating commonplaces, Ballard being afraid to break the ice, and the captain, as an older man and the adviser in the matter, considering it undignified for him to know the object of the unusual visit, John said :—

"Captain, I came here with Ballard to find out something about my father ; what is it?"

To the captain this was a very improper way of opening a subject of such importance. He had never before had so grave an affair to administer, and he wanted to approach it in a fitting manner. He desired not to be thrown into the midst of the subject before John had an opportunity to appreciate its importance. His purpose was to reveal its proportions little by little ; at least to stand off and study it from a distance, and not to rush into it as though it were an ordinary, every-day, affair. Therefore he began a hesitating, halting, speech on the history of his own knowledge of the matter, of how Ballard came to him with his story, and of the advice with which he, Symonds, had favored his young friend, with a little philosophy as to the best method of making an unpleasant communication, the duty

one friend owes to another, when John interrupted the old man impatiently, saying : —

“ Captain, if you’ll tell me the story, good or bad, I’ll be very much obliged.”

The captain hesitated a moment, and after fruitlessly urging Ballard to repeat the tale, “because it’s yourn’, after all,” — permitted himself to be persuaded, and went on in this wise : —

“ Wall, John, ef you want it you shell hev it ; you always did hev what you wanted, anyhow, and even the doctor wasn’t set enough in his ways to hender ye. The truth is, Sim’s discovered a mare’s-nest. Ye know he haint no occasion to love the doctor, for the old man’s squeezed him pretty hard on that debt of his’n, and he’s tried to find out suthin’ agin him so as to get even with him. Wall, to make a long story short, he was listenin’ one night ” —

“ I overheard them,” interrupted Ballard.

“ Ef you want to tell this story, you ken,” said the captain, with much offended dignity. “ Some folks call it overhearin’, but some calls it listenin’, and I guess the doctor would speak about it as I do.” Then he went on : “ He heard a talk between the doctor and Basswood and Persons. At first he couldn’t onderstan’ what they were talkin’ about. The doctor was mad and the other two was aggravatin’ like ; but in the end Sim heard the doctor say, ‘ Where’s your proof ?’

“ ‘ I’ve seen the girl,’ says Persons.

"'Where?' says the doctor.

"'In Washington,' says Persons." Saying this, the captain rose and filled a pipe of tobacco.

"Hev a smoke, John?" he asked.

"No ; no ; go on with the story," answered the young man quickly, "what girl were they talking about?"

"Mary Pickerin'."

"Mary Pickering? why she's been dead for years," said John. Hope broke in upon him with its soothing light, and he found some consolation in the thought that the two rascally lawyers had probably conspired to defraud his father by pretending to have discovered Mary Pickering. His father knew of the child's death, he was certain, and this attempt to play upon him appeared unworthy of the astute Basswood, and the cunning Persons.

"How do you know Mary Pickerin's dead?" asked Ballard.

"I know that my father went down to find her, and that when he came back he said she was dead," answered John.

The captain smoked his pipe, and, picking a splinter from the hearth, began whittling. Ballard was plainly too embarrassed to look at any one, and for some time John was silent, fearful lest the continuance of the conversation might result in the flat contradiction of his father, and might create a suspicion in his own mind that a crime had been committed. But it was necessary to go to the end, no matter what that end might be, so the young

man asked, in a tone which indicated that he had prepared himself for the worst :—

"Is there anything else?"

"Wall, y-e-s." The captain hesitated again, for, although he had known that the narration would be attended with embarrassments, he had been very much more anxious to begin than he now was to continue. He had not half realized the effect of the presence of the ingenuous young man whom he liked, and who had come to listen to the story of his father's perfidy.

"We might as well have it, then," said John. "You thought it best to tell me, and you had best get through with your work."

"John," continued the captain, "I don't blame ye for bein' stirred up, and for lookin' on the world, includin' me and Sim, as agin ye; when bad luck comes the friend that carries the news is always the fust to get the cussin'."

"My dear old friend," interrupted John.

"Steady, John, I aint blaming of ye. It's natur' for ye to be mad clean through; I know me'n Sim 'll come out all right in the end."

Then he paused again to refill and relight his pipe. It was evident that he liked the task less and less. When he did go on he had screwed up his courage to the point of pushing through, regardless of consequences.

"John, ef Doctor Rantoul knows that Mary Pickerin's dead, of course he's all right. Ye know the affidavy he made to take out letters, don't ye?"

"No, I don't know anything about taking out letters," answered this young man, whose utter lack of prudence made him incomprehensible to Captain Symonds.

"Nat'rally," continued the old man, "he had to take out letters before he could administer on the estate. Wall, before he did that he took his affidavit that the people he left the child with, — the name's Strand, — down there in North Caroliny, — that them people had moved away, and that their house was occupied by a black man, who told him that the girl was dead."

"Well, isn't that proof enough?" eagerly asked John, who grasped at any faint ray of hope which came shimmering through the gloom.

"H-m-m!" The captain was again disturbed. He had determined to accomplish his task by going through it as fast as he could. He dreaded, above all things, to hear John's voice, and to be compelled to answer his questions. But he went on: —

"I s'pose so, leastways the probate judge thought it was, for he give the doctor the letters, and that give him the property."

"Well!" suggested John.

"Wall!" repeated the captain. "The long 'n' short of it's this, John: Sim heard Persons tell the doctor that he'd found young Strand, who was brought up with Mary, and he 'lowed that the whole story was a lie from beginning to end, 'n' that Mary had been adopted by a rich old man from Virginny, when he and his mother had moved down to Texas."

"The story's a lie!" shouted John. "Didn't the doctor face it down, Sim?"

"Well," answered Ballard, "I don't know as you'd exactly call it facin' it down."

"What do you mean?" John was very much excited, and Ballard was nervous and incoherent by reason of the intensity of the scene. He made several ineffectual attempts to explain his meaning, but the captain had again to come to the rescue.

"Sim's all right, John; jest you keep cool ef you ken. The doctor didn't exactly face 'em down. He began to let into 'em, tellin' of 'em that they were a pair of rascals, and darin' of 'em to do their worst; but he had a sort o' faintin' fit, and they had to help him into his buggy, and take him home. He was jest gettin' about agin when you come home."

John recalled his father's whitened hair and changed face. His mother had told him that the doctor was greatly broken, and the neighbors whispered that he had had a slight stroke of paralysis. He had been forced, very unwillingly, to surrender part of his practice to a younger physician, so that he was at home more than he used to be. Apparently he had grown no softer in his affliction, but was still silent and morose, more silent even than he had been before. A startled look came into his eyes when he was suddenly addressed, and this was the greatest and most serious change which John had noticed when he found his father walking painfully about the yard, leaning heavily on a stout cane.

The old man had now grown better, and was able to ride about the country on visits to his patients. Still there remained the startled look which, in the light of the story he had just listened to, seemed to John to be a confession.

When the captain had finished telling what Simeon Ballard had heard no one of the three men said anything. The old fisherman puffed vigorously at his pipe, leaning forward, his forearms resting on his legs, and whittling in apparent unconsciousness that he was "ontidyin'" Mrs. Symonds's parlor. Ballard fidgeted in his chair, and wished he was at the village store, and at liberty to talk over the matter with his friends and neighbors. John thought of his father, of his broken ambition, of the evidence against him. He wondered why the doctor had been so grasping as to steal the property of the child of his dead sister. He longed to find some excuse for the hard old man who was nevertheless his father, and he hoped that it would be discovered that he was ignorant of the truth when he made that fatal affidavit. But, then, now that he had heard that his niece still lived, why did he not find her? Why did he not make restitution? When John rose to go his brain was in a whirl, and his heart was heavy. He was sure that his mother always suspected that her husband was guilty of a great wrong to Mary Pickering, for he recollected that, months ago, she told him of her fears; but he felt that she could not know of these recent reve-

lations ; she was too happy in her companionship with her boy. Then he recalled how she had insisted on avoiding the discussion of the doctor's affairs, and of his relations with the two lawyers, so that the more he reflected on the subject the more he was perplexed.

When he next saw his father he determined to satisfy himself of the truth. He hoped to hear from the doctor's lips that the conspiracy of the lawyers was based on a lie, which they had invented for the purpose of extorting money. The hope was against all his light and all his knowledge, but it was very natural for John to hope.

"I've heard rather a strange story, sir," he said, "which I think you ought to know about."

This was the longest and by far the most important remark John had addressed to his father for many months. He noticed that the glance which the old man gave him was like that of a startled and frightened animal. The look which was now constantly in his cold eyes was greatly intensified.

"Humph!" sneered he, "you were always full o' strange stories when you were an idlin', worthless boy; 'n now that you've grown to be the same kind of a man I s'pose the fondness for the stories sticks to ye." And the old man started to move away as if he did not care what John had heard. Experience taught him that the easiest way to rid himself of his son's presence, when it was disagreeable, was by insolence. But this time the harsh words did

not accomplish the desired result. John was determined that his father should know that the conversation in the post-office with Basswood and Persons had been overheard; and moreover, he was bent on ascertaining as much as possible of the mystery about Mary Pickering. Before he quitted the captain's house he asked the name of the Virginians who adopted the girl; but on that point Ballard was unable to give him any information. The doctor's sudden attack of illness put an end to the conversation before that interesting and important fact was revealed.

"I haven't invented this story," the son answered, "and I wouldn't trouble you by repeating it if it did not concern your honor."

The doctor turned sharply and spoke angrily, and yet John saw that the frightened look in the eye was emphasized, and that the hand which carried the stick trembled.

"Stonecliff folks," he snarled, "hev been takin' a good deal of interest in my affairs lately. But it's none o' their business, I tell ye; it's none o' their business, and I wunt hev their idle chatterin' repeated to me by you. I hear enough of it without hevin' it flung into my face by my own family."

"It seems to me that you already know what the story is."

The old man did not grow any calmer on hearing this, but he regained a little of his accustomed prudence.

"It does seem so, does it? Well, 'taint so. You hev a woman's faculty for jumpin' at conclusions, jest as you hev for findin' mares'-nests, and for work and play. How should I know what lies they've been stuffin' you with? Whatever they were I suppose you were ready enough to believe them. You always were ondootiful, and about as useless a son as a father could hev."

"Hard words can't alter facts, sir, and I want to know, for my own sake, what there is of truth in the story which I have heard." John spoke calmly, and with a dignity which surprised his father; the change of character indicated by it startled the old man. His son was a different person from the hot-headed, wayward, youth he had known.

"What *I* want to know is," the doctor almost shrieked in his anger, "what concern of yours is my business? When did you begin to take an interest in my affairs?"

"The moment they touched the honor of the name which you and I bear, sir."

"Humph!" sneered the doctor, "you've learned a heap of fine words in your travels; a good deal too fine for a house-painter. Why didn't you improve your manners at the same time?"

As the doctor said this he gave vent to a malignant chuckle, and started to move off. John's face flushed at this last insult, but what he had in mind was of too great importance to be brushed aside by reflections upon himself or his calling.

"One moment, sir," said John; "I have not told you the story which I have heard."

The old man stumbled a little in the two or three steps which he took after hearing this. If he had been astonished by his son's dignity and self-control he was much more surprised by this display of determination. He had never taken into account the element of wilfulness which was almost the only trait John had inherited from him. When the doctor turned his face was white, and its paleness was alarming. John started forward as if to assist the tottering invalid; but the old man recovered, and, straightening himself with an effort, said:—

"When I want information or advice from you, I'll ask for it. Until you hear from me just you keep your stories and your unfavorable opinions about your father to yourself. I washed my hands o' you years ago, and you'd better foller my example, this time, ef you never hev before."

"You cannot escape hearing this story sir." John went on: "I heard that Basswood and Persons told you that Mary Pickering is not dead."

The change which came over the doctor was pitiable. In a moment, almost in a second, years seemed to add themselves to his life. He looked to John as a hunted and betrayed criminal might have looked. He stared helplessly at his thoroughly frightened son, and his lips moved but made no sound. John was alarmed at the effect of his own words. The instant he had spoken them he wished them recalled.

He had not accurately calculated their power, because he had not fully believed in their truth. Now compassion, and the longing to hear the story denied, took the place of all other feelings, and, as he put his arm around his father to steady his steps, he said : —

"I don't imagine the story is true, sir ; but I thought you ought to know what people are talking about, so that you may stop the slanders."

The doctor was dazed. His eyes were almost expressionless ; but in a moment his will reasserted itself, and he pushed John roughly from him.

"Le' me go," he snarled. "I always thought you were a fool, and now I know it."

Saying this, the father made his way alone back into the house ; but he paid no professional visits that day, nor did he speak again, but sat in his own room until evening. His wife looked in on him two or three times, and it seemed to her that his hair and face were visibly whitening. When she addressed him, for she was much troubled by his illness, she was warned away by an impatient motion.

The son stood looking after the father as the latter made his painful way through the broad hall. The longest and most important interview of their lives was over. Another shadow had crept into the young man's life, — a black and hideous shadow.

CHAPTER XX.

THE INSIDIOUS INFLUENCE OF THE HEART.

It was August, and Mrs. Randolph was on the North Shore. John Rantoul did not know that she was so near to him when he went away from the house, after his interview with his father, nor did Mrs. Randolph recollect that there was such a place as Stonecliff. She and her husband had gone to *Rhododendron* by chance, and in the course of somewhat aimless, but pleasant, wanderings.

One delicious morning when the wind was just strong enough to top an occasional wave with a white cap, and the small yachts were flying about the harbor under the cliff on which stood the hotel, Mrs. Randolph was sitting on the piazza reading. There were other women on the piazza, who were not reading; they were knitting or crocheting, or were engaged in some similar occupation which was useful or ornamental, and still conducive to conversation. Mrs. Randolph rarely employed herself in this way. Envy said this was to preserve her beautiful hands, but the truth was she had much respect for her mind, and she derived more pleasure from stimulating it than she could have obtained from playing with the brightest worsteds, or indulg-

ing in the most entertaining gossip. As she sat reading the other women talked about her.

"She's very pretty," said an elderly person looking at her over the tops of her spectacles.

"And she is perfectly lovely," said an enthusiastic young woman who had attached herself to Mrs. Randolph, as a devotee, from the first moment of their acquaintance.

"She makes a very beautiful picture," said a third; "but I do wonder how she occupies her time; she never has any work in her hands."

A good old lady answered this by saying: "My dear, Mrs. Randolph was born to be a queen. Don't judge her by our standards, her time is better employed than ours, perhaps, though we can't see it."

And so the gossip ran on with true summer-resort inconsequence, while Mrs. Randolph, unconscious of it all, read Plato's "Symposium."

Why did she read the "Symposium"? Because she liked to drink in the beautiful discourse of Socrates on love. And why were her thoughts bent on love? Because she still had John Rantoul in her mind, and she longed almost passionately that she might be convinced that the love which she believed the young man felt for her, kindled by her inspiration, was of the highest and best kind of which the great Greek spoke—a love which begets beauty of mind and heart. But could such a love exist between a man and a woman? She had asked herself this question a thousand times, and she had

never found a satisfactory answer. The desire to inspire John Rantoul to be a great artist had become the ambition of her life. Since he fled from her in Washington he had been almost constantly in her mind. It was this confession of the character of his own feeling for her which prevented a decisive answer to her question. Although a man and a woman might, perhaps, have a purely intellectual love for one another, such a love as is sometimes felt by a man for a man, — could John Rantoul feel that love for her? Had he not confessed that he loved her as men generally love women?

In the early weeks of the summer Mr. Randolph found his wife nervous and uncertain. He discovered that her usually equable temperament was disturbed, and that she had lost her repose of manner, which had always been one of her charms. The good man attributed the change to the reaction after the exacting demands of the season. Reaction is obliged to answer for a good deal of nervousness which it never occasions. Therefore he had taken her away for a summer of idle sauntering. He would not go to Newport, or to any other great watering-place, for the life there would be merely a repetition of the winter in Washington. So it was they had come to Rhododendron which overlooks the sea in front, and the beautiful harbor at its side, and where the broad Atlantic sports or grieves or rages for the guests, as their moods may be. Still Mrs. Randolph had not regained her composure, but,

having learned that her husband noticed that she was the victim of moods, she made an outward show of calmness which completely deceived and pleased him. To one thing she had fully made up her mind, — that she would never consciously cause Mr. Randolph a moment's unhappiness, and this for her own sake as well as for his, for she believed that no misery is so great as that which comes from inflicting misery on others. Nevertheless she was not happy, for she thought that her great ambition was to go unsatisfied. One momentous fact she did not see. She did not realize that her husband was becoming less interesting to her. Before she had undertaken to inspire John Rantoul she had found great comfort in Mr. Randolph's calm strength and uneventful life and character. He never did anything or said anything which jarred upon her. Moreover his sound judgment was always at her service, and was of great help to her. At that time she had no aspirations that were not satisfied. Now, there was a lack of something in her life, and she was possessed of a feverish anxiety to gain what she wanted. She had expanded under the subtle influence of her sympathy with the artist, and the man to whom she was united was no longer of any assistance to her. On the contrary his failure to comprehend her became an element of disturbance. If she were not a woman of so great nature this incapacity to understand her would have annoyed and exasperated her. As it was, her manner was as sweet and charming as it had

ever been, and she remained an object almost of adoration to her husband and to Agnes Linthicomb.

For Agnes was with the Randolphs at Rhododendron. She had come to the place very unwillingly, for she knew that it would bring Marion Randolph very near to John Rantoul. However, she could give no reasons for her objections that were satisfactory to her friends. After the conversation which she and Marion had about John's flight the two never spoke of him. Agnes could not bring herself to allude to a man who, she knew, loved Mrs. Randolph; and, moreover, the stately dignity of her friend would have repelled her if she had been inclined to speak. Therefore, although she more than once had it in her mind to say that Rhododendron was too near Stonecliff, she refrained, the result being that she found herself in a constant state of nervous trepidation lest Rantoul should hear of their nearness to him and be unable to resist the temptation of paying them a visit.

She had not seen John, but Scolly had, and, as the artist appeared to be interested in his work (this was in the days when he was beginning to be patronized), the conclusion which Agnes's lover reached was that time and absence were in a fair way to work a cure. Miss Linthicomb, however, was sure that a permanent cure had not yet been effected, and that a revival of comradeship would reawaken John's love, and this time perhaps to an intensity which would lead to deplor-

able results. She prayed that he might stay away ; but on this lovely morning she received some news that frightened her. Scolly had arrived, and had seen Rantoul a day or two before he quitted Boston.

"Of course you didn't say that we were here," said Agnes.

"I believe I did tell him," answered Scolly ; "but why not?"

"O Robert ! I think you ought to know why not." Miss Linthicomb betrayed so much distress that Scolly was plunged in despair. He did not yet realize that he had been guilty of anything very wrong. He supposed that John had determined to never again see Mrs. Randolph, and that it was quite as easy to carry out this decision as it had been to arrive at it. So far as he knew himself he believed that he could do with himself whatever he undertook, and he was unable to understand any stronger emotions or any weaker will than his own. Yet, in the presence of the pain which he appeared to have innocently inflicted on Miss Linthicomb, he wished that he had not told Rantoul that Mrs. Randolph was in Rhododendron.

The young woman said a good many things which were not complimentary to her lover, and concluded impatiently, "We'll have to go away from here now just as fast as the cars will carry us."

"You don't imagine that Rantoul will come here, do you?" stammered Scolly, in evident surprise that he should have occasion to ask such a question.

"Why, of course he will," answered the young woman, equally surprised that such a question should have been asked.

"You are constantly doing Rantoul injustice; he is not the man you take him for," said Scolly.

Miss Linthicomb blazed into anger at this; there was a tone of superiority in Scolly's remark which made its injustice all the more unbearable.

"You think I'm unjust, do you?" she said. "If my memory serves me you thought I was wrong when I told you that he was in love with Marion Randolph; and you remarked that I was unjust to him when I told you that I feared he had told her of his love. It's true that he hadn't told her in words," went on Miss Linthicomb, anxious to meet the answer which she saw from Scolly's face was coming, "but he told her plainly enough by leaving Washington so abruptly."

"Well, well," said Scolly, "don't let's discuss that. I'm sure he won't come now."

"Robert Scolly, you haven't the faintest conception of John Rantoul."

"If he's the kind of man you seem to take him for, my dear, I'm glad I haven't." Saying this, Scolly quitted the piazza, and went off to the shore, where he sat on a rock half the day, nursing his wrath, and wondering if this were to be the end of all his bright dreams of the future. Would Agnes never relent? and so on through the scale of feeling, from deter-

mined rage to the most contrite anguish, with which most lovers, the world over, are familiar.

Meantime Miss Linthicomb went in search of Mrs. Randolph, determined to let her know that John Rantoul was very near her, and that he knew where she was. She felt that she must save him from his danger.

As the girl approached she had so far controlled herself that she gave no sign of unusual excitement, and Mrs. Randolph, laying down her book, smiled very sweetly and said, "I have been hoping you would come, dear ; I want to have a chat with you."

"And I want to have a talk with you, Marion," answered Agnes.

"Then we both are in a fair way to be gratified, are we not?" said Mrs. Randolph with a pleasant laugh. "But if your talk can be postponed for a short time, let me go on with mine first ; for my subject may escape me if I have to wait."

Agnes thought what she desired to say very important ; but she was not inclined, under the circumstances, to assert herself. Perhaps Mrs. Randolph would not agree with her.

There was much gentleness in Mrs. Randolph's manner as she went on, "You seem to me very happy, dear." She had never before introduced the subject of Agnes's love, but she had very many times been made the confidante of the younger woman's happiness. The truth was, that, though she rejoiced in the girl's gladness, there was nothing

in the experiences of the smooth-running engagement which made their narration very interesting. While it was the good old story it was nevertheless old, and Mrs. Randolph did not care to hear it oftener than Agnes herself introduced it. Miss Linthicomb was wholly unconscious of having always begun the conversations, still she was a little astonished to hear these words at this moment, for she was not happy. She was alarmed for John Rantoul, and, what was worse, she had had a quarrel with her lover. She believed that she must show her uncomfortable frame of mind in every feature, but if she had been at all observant she would have seen that Marion Randolph had yet hardly looked at her, and that her eyes betrayed that she was very much occupied with thoughts of her own. So unconscious, indeed, was she of her companion's mood, that she was not aroused by the half-complaining and wholly unusual tone in which Miss Linthicomb answered, "I suppose I am — happy enough." On the contrary, she went on as if in a dream : —

"I suppose that a great love brings a wonderful happiness."

"Yes ; and great wretchedness, sometimes. I'm sure I don't know but they balance each other."

Mrs. Randolph heard the words, but not the petulance, and, as she answered, her eyes had still the far-away look of one who sees beyond material things.

"Yes ; the misery of a great love must be the greatest that human nature knows."

Then she seemed to arouse herself, and, looking at Agnes, noticed that a cloud was on the usually sunny face.

"Why, child," she said with that cheering voice which always drove away ills from the lives of those who loved her, "what has happened to you? Your lover is here, and you ought to be all smiles. What troubles you, dear?"

Agnes would not, for the world, have had Mrs. Randolph know of the pettiness of her morning's quarrel with Scolly. Her very presence made Miss Linthicomb heartily ashamed of her undignified vexation, and she at once determined to find Scolly at the first opportunity and to beg his forgiveness. She did not then know — she never could know — that Marion Randolph would not have understood a love which left any room for forgiveness, which could recognize any sin against it but a mortal sin.

When Miss Linthicomb answered she was in a contrite and better mood, and she said lightly, "Nothing troubles me now, Marion. I was annoyed by a trifle when I came to you, but being near you has made me quite myself again."

"Was it really not much of a trouble, Agnes?" Mrs. Randolph's voice betrayed a sympathetic concern which quickened the love of the girl, who ran to her friend and kissed her as she exclaimed, "So little that I would not tell you for the world."

"Well, dear, I do not want to know unless I can

be of some help to you," and then she went again into her revery, finally saying, "I suppose that you think always of Robert Scolly as your lover, do you not?"

"Why, of course I do; how else should I think of him?" replied Agnes, with evident surprise in her voice.

"In no other way; you do not understand me, I think. I mean, do you ever think of him as possessing anything but love for you?"

"I hardly understand you yet, Marion," answered Agnes, who was half troubled by the drift of the talk. "Do you mean, do I love him just because he loves me?"

"Hardly that; for you were certainly attracted by him long before he told you of his love; I mean this, when you think of him, and I suppose that you are always doing that, do you think of him as a man of strong character, a man of good mind, a man of sterling worth, or as a handsome man who loves you devotedly?"

This was a hard question for Agnes, for she desired not only to endow her lover with all the qualities which go to the making of a fine manhood, but that it should be understood that her love for him had a rational basis. If she had been asked the reason for this love she would have enumerated her hero's virtues, but she had not been asked that, but what she most frequently thought of in connection with him; and she was obliged to confess that it

was simply love which was in her mind when she thought of Scolly, or when he was with her, and she answered somewhat hesitatingly : —

"I suppose that when one is in love there isn't time or occasion to think of anything ; one is just mad about it, you know, and everything is so delicious and bright and beautiful, that one can only feel the delights of it all." She blushed when she had said this, but at the sense that she was narrating an experience which Mrs. Randolph had already had. So she concluded, saying, "But why should I tell this to you who knew and felt it all before I dreamed of it?"

Mrs. Randolph made no answer, but went on as if communing with herself: "Yes, I suppose that is the way with happy lovers ; that the love of men and women is like the passion about which Agathon sings, the passion which makes poets of all whom it touches. It is such an emotional ecstasy that those who feel it can only sing and be glad."

"That's it exactly, Marion," broke in Agnes excitedly. "Your love for Mr. Randolph must have been very much like mine for Robert. I don't know who Agathon was ; but if he talked as you do he must have been a lover himself."

The mention of her love for her husband had a not altogether pleasant effect on Mrs. Randolph. She had never loved as Agnes appeared to love. She had accepted Mr. Randolph's proposal calmly and without much fluttering of the heart. He had

her unbounded respect, for he was more nearly like the ideal man which she had been taught to look up to; he had her own idea of the manly virtues more fully developed, than any man she had ever met. Strength, practical common sense, reserve power, judicial-mindedness, all these he had in a marked degree, and all these Marion Randolph had been instructed to regard as the best possessions of masculine human nature. For ten years of married life she had lived with her restful companion, and, on the whole, life had been very agreeable. He never excited her, and her emotions were never aroused except through her intellect. Until now Mr. Randolph's placidity had never had an unpleasant effect on her nerves, but there was no doubt that her nature was undergoing a change, and she sometimes found herself wondering what was wanting to make her completely happy. During all these years she had supposed that she lacked absolutely nothing; if a strong emotion swept her she found rest and comfort in the calm presence of the man who had recently become as exasperating as a graven image which looks as though it ought to pronounce oracles, but which keeps its chiselled lips severely closed against all questioning. She knew that she was expanding, and that she needed for continued growth the sympathy and intellectual coöperation, under the influence of which the seeds had been planted. Naturally she looked to her husband, but, for the first time, he disappointed her; and now that she

heard from Agnes Linthicomb the story of her love of Robert Scolly, she concluded, with what seemed to be a strange absence of sadness, that she had been mistaken all these years, and that she had never loved her husband.

But then she was in love with no one else. Her heart did not sing so loudly that her intellect was not heard. It is true she believed that a poetical side of her nature was awakened, and something made life more full of gladness; but all this had a substantial basis. She had become possessed of a great ambition, and she felt the charm of an intellectual companionship as she had never felt it before.

She sat so long thinking all this out, that Agnes Linthicomb began to wonder what the drift of her talk might be. At last she asked:—

“But why are you so interested in the quality of my love, Marion?”

Mrs. Randolph kissed Miss Linthicomb’s forehead and answered, “Because I am very much interested in you, dear; and I hope your heart will always sing to you as it does to-day, and that Mr. Scolly will always have the qualities which will touch the most musical chord in your nature.”

“I’m sure,” said Agnes, with almost reproof in her tone.

“You ought to be sure,” interrupted Mrs. Randolph. “But love is a blind god, and marriage is a lottery. I always thought these little sayings very commonplace; I suppose they are not, though; but

that they are immortal truths; that the love of a man and a woman is engrossing and nearly irrational, and that the chances are, therefore, against them, — but," continued she, playfully, noticing a shadow creeping over Agnes's face, "I ought not to say this to you. I have no doubt that Robert Scolly is quite the man he ought to be, to be worthy of so fair a wife. I have used my mind, you see, if yours has been shut up by your love."

"Why, Marion, I never before realized that you were cynical!" Agnes's blue eyes were wide open in astonishment.

"And you mustn't think that you realize it now," answered Mrs. Randolph, with a pleasant laugh, taking the girl's hand in hers.

In truth Mrs. Randolph was in an exceptionally happy frame of mind, for Agnes Linthicomb had convinced her that her strong desire to see John Rantoul, and to be again a constant inspiration to him, did not come from love of him, at least, from the kind of love which brings men and women close together and into dangerous relations. She misinterpreted Socrates very perversely, but the heart can nearly always make the mind dishonest. Being certain that her own feeling for John was of an intellectual and a very exalted character, she began wondering if she might not lead the man into the pure ether where her own affections dwelt. She believed that they two were great enough to escape the snares and pitfalls which destroy smaller natures.

"Are you through with your talk?" said Agnes, after waiting some minutes for Mrs. Randolph to continue.

"Yes, dear; I hadn't much to say, after all, had I? I hope that your words will have more wisdom in them."

"I can't tell how much wisdom your words contained," Miss Linthicomb answered, "because I hardly appreciate their meaning."

Mrs. Randolph wondered if Agnes Linthicomb had read her thoughts, but she saw no guile in the blue eyes, so she said: "There really wasn't much wisdom in what I said; I had a foolish fancy which I wanted to gratify, that is all. But what did you want to say to me?"

"Oh, I merely wanted to tell you something I have heard."

"Is it very interesting?"

"Very important."

"Why should your mind be burdened with important things; come, relieve yourself of it at once, and let me carry the gravity of life, while you go singing through the flowery meads of love; there, now, isn't that generous?"

"You are always generous and noble and good, Marion; but this news is very important, I think."

"Why, how serious you are, Agnes! One would think you had affairs of government on your mind."

But Mrs. Randolph's merry mood was suddenly checked, when Agnes Linthicomb told her that John

Rantoul was within ten miles of Rhododendron, and knew how near he was to the woman whom he loved. She did not start, she evidently was not shocked, she uttered no exclamation, but there was almost happiness in the trembling tones in which she asked, "And did Mr. Scolly tell you anything about him?"

"Nothing new," said Agnes.

"Nothing new?"

"Nothing except the story of his success, which we have so often heard."

"Yes, I am very glad of his success. He will be a great artist, yet, Agnes." When she spoke again she asked, very sweetly, "And — and — was he happy?"

"He is happy when he is at work, I believe."

Agnes was sorely disappointed. Marion Randolph was evidently not going to run away, and Miss Linthicomb could not urge upon her the propriety of flight. She asked, however, if their stay at Rhododendron would be much longer, and Mrs. Randolph answered, dreamily, "I do not know."

Then Agnes asked, "Do you think that John Rantoul will come here?"

And then Mrs. Randolph answered, still dreamily, "I do not know."

CHAPTER XXI.

A DANGEROUS MEETING.

As a matter of course John Rantoul went to Rhododendron. The thought that he might see Mrs. Randolph came to him as soon as Scolly told him where she was. It came to him with a wild throbbing of his heart, and yet, the moment afterwards, he began to argue himself out of it. The more he reasoned, however, the stronger became his inclination to do directly the opposite of what he knew to be proper. Hadn't he a right to go to Rhododendron? Was not the "Norman House" a public hostelry, open to all well-behaved strangers? Finally, was it not his duty to call on such intimate and kind friends as the Randolphs and Agnes Linthcomb? Any one who has had experience can see the conclusion of such reflections. The man who indulged in them was greatly mistaken as to his own mental processes; he was not considering his duty at all, he was simply seeking for an excuse. The intention to go to Mrs. Randolph was ineradicably formed with that first leap of the heart. John thought that he struggled against his inclination, honestly enough; but, as a matter of fact, he

was trying to give the color of reason to his determination.

As he neared Rhododendron, he began to wonder about his reception. He had heard not a word from Mrs. Randolph since his departure from Washington. Scolly had not mentioned her name, except on this one occasion, and John had not asked about her. He had no doubt as to the interpretation which had been put on his flight; he was sure that all who knew of it recognized that he entertained a hopeless passion for Mrs. Randolph.

As the cars flew over the miles he wondered how he dared to face people who were possessed of his secret, and especially Mrs. Randolph, who, he thought, must look upon his love as anything but respectful. It will be easily seen, by a good many people who are much younger in years than John, that he was ingenuous and simple, and that, whatever his experience, he had not learned that love is something at which there is much playing. He always regarded it as very sacred, and no more to be trifled with than religion. Perhaps if he had been better acquainted with the world he would not have been in so uncertain a frame of mind when he started to walk from the station to the hotel; he would not have so greatly dreaded Mrs. Randolph's possible resentment of the homage which he offered her.

Mrs. Randolph was sitting on the cliff, and, as the cars stopped at the station, she was wondering

if John Rantoul would come to see her, and while she wondered, the young man who was in her mind walked up the dusty road to the hotel. He did not ride in the "barge," because he wanted time for reflection, and yet he was still uncertain and doubting when he inquired for her, and was told by the clerk that she was out. Without daring to ask for her favorite walks, and not desiring to see Miss Linthcomb or Scolly, he wandered off, hoping to meet her, and yet afraid. He did not go far, however, before he saw her. Although her back was towards him he could not mistake her. As he made his way to her he asked himself if she would be cold. When this possibility occurred to him he upbraided himself for making what now appeared to him distinctly enough an absurd venture. He believed that the slightest exhibition of reserve would blast his future existence, and even destroy the delightful memories of the past, with which he had consoled himself.

But his fears were soon dissipated, for Mrs. Randolph, hearing his footsteps, turned, recognized him with a beaming face, and greeted him cordially. Then they sat on the cliff together, and were embarrassed. They could not begin a conversation, and the memory of the Washington episode grew and grew until its proportions shadowed everything. At last John said:—

"I thought I might take the liberty of coming to see you."

"I am very glad you have come," she answered; "but really I had no idea that we should be so near you, when we came here."

"Well, I didn't happen to be very near; but"—

"But have you not been in Stonecliff? Does not your family live there?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm there sometimes. Yes; that is my home, but I'm in Boston most of the time, you know," John said.

"I hear very pleasant accounts of you," continued Mrs. Randolph. "I hear that you are working splendidly, and producing fine results."

"There is every reason why I should work well."

"That is true of every man of talent."

"You think that the possession of power implies the will and the inclination to make the power effective?"

"I think it ought to, — don't you?"

"Perhaps, but it doesn't," said John, and then, throwing himself at full length on his back and looking up into the sky, he went on, "Do you know that I've never done anything because it was my duty, — I mean anything outside of the ordinary routine of life. I can't sit down in front of a clean new canvas and conjure up a subject by the exercise of my will. I've got to wait till it comes to me."

"But getting a subject is not an every-day task, and you can surely paint every day after you know the end you want to accomplish."

"That may be, unless my moods happen to be bad."

Mrs. Randolph observed that his face was changed. There was more gravity in it, and it was finer, but there was sadness in it, too, and the eyes had not a certain dancing, happy, light which had been one of John's chief attractions. After he had uttered the last words he lay for a long time with his eyes half closed; suddenly he turned to her and said abruptly, "You have done everything for me."

Mrs. Randolph answered with a calm and even voice, and without the slightest apparent emotion, "I think you exaggerate the good I have done you; you know," she added laughingly, "we are inclined to make a good deal more of our friendships than they deserve."

"I know, however," John said, with the old vehemence which she had often heard, "that I might have remained a decorative artist forever, if you had not made me ashamed of my own inactivity and lack of ambition. Whatever work I have done that is good for anything I date from that first walk I took with you last winter."

"Now, really," said Mrs. Randolph, turning and looking down at him very frankly, "you are simply giving me credit for what is due your own power, which was called out by an agreeable atmosphere. I should be very glad to be considered your sole inspiration, but I know I'm not."

"But I know you are; why didn't I — but what's the use of arguing about it? I know what sent me to my work, and who gave me a worthy purpose;

and I've wanted to tell you this ever since I — ever since I left Washington."

"You left in a great hurry, didn't you?" she said. "I have often wondered why business is so exacting as to absolutely snatch one's friends out of one's sight."

Mrs. Randolph said this so unreservedly, and with such evident sincerity, that John began to hope that what he had always looked upon as a rather lame excuse might stand him in good stead.

"Yes," he answered, "I was forced away very hurriedly. But now that I see you again," he went on, "I shall not leave unsaid what I ought to have told you long ago; and that is, that I shall be grateful to you, all my life, for your friendly sympathy and for the inspiration it has been to me."

When John ended, the force of his own feelings made him conclude that it must be for this purpose that he had come to Rhododendron. It is true that no thought of making any such speech, or, indeed, of expressing gratitude in any form, had occurred to him until this moment. In the tumult of his heart and the disorder of his mind one image alone had been present, and that was of Mrs. Randolph. He really went to Rhododendron because he believed that he could not resist his fate. He must see the woman whom he loved. Still, now that he had told her of her fine influence over him, and of his gratitude, he really believed that the desire to do this was the unrecognized cause of his coming, and he

was rather proud of himself for making the journey.

Mrs. Randolph made no reply, but looked into John's eyes with so sweet a light in her own that her lover realized that he had never before dreamed what divine beauty a mortal could possess. An inexpressible happiness filled him; the ills of the world departed; the sea and the earth and the air were full of music, so soft as to be a mere suggestion of a harmony in keeping with the inward harmony of his spirit; the waving of the grass in the breeze, the slight movement of the waves, were unseen. There was nothing visible but light, — the light which glistened on the waters and brought out the gold in the green of the verdure, and shining beyond all in her beautiful eyes, — the light of the woman's soul which was filled with the wonderful joy that came to her when she found how much her inspiration was to the man before her. John could have remained looking up into that face forever; but Mrs. Randolph at last broke the spell by abruptly turning away. It was she who first spoke, saying: —

"How peaceful the sea is to-day!"

"Yes," said John, and, as if concluding that the conversation might as well become less introspective, added, "How can you bear to leave this place? It is the most beautiful coast in the world."

"I've said nothing about leaving it; I am better contented here than I have ever been anywhere."

"I thought that you were always contented."

"Well, if contentment means taking the world as I find it I suppose I am."

"Don't you find taking the world as you find it rather exasperating sometimes?"

"Why should I?" she asked. "I long ago made up my mind that the most uncomfortable part to play is that of a reformer."

"But you have a higher ideal of life than most people, yes, than any one I have ever known, and I should think that the trivialities you hear, the little-nesses you see, would disturb you."

Mrs. Randolph was ploughing up the sand in front of her with her parasol, and was evidently thinking very deeply. Her mind was more engrossed than her speech indicated. She believed that she saw an opportunity to determine the relations which ought to exist between herself and John. When she spoke again it was in a lighter tone and with a little laugh.

"Why, I just don't think about them; if a man or a woman is trivial how can I help it? And when I am with such people I deliberately determine to be as frivolous as they are. I can't afford to make myself unhappy for other people."

Although there was lightness in her tone and laughter in her voice John was chilled by her speech. It was a new evidence of the coldness of which Scolly had often spoken, and in which John himself sometimes half believed. His happiness came to a sudden ending, for it rested entirely on

his belief in Mrs. Randolph's sympathy with him ; he was distressed by what appeared to him the heartlessness of her words, and it was with an effort, and dreading the answer, that he asked : —

"Do you mean to say that you would make no sacrifices for your friends?"

Mrs. Randolph was nervous, and there was more excitement in her manner than John had ever seen. Her face turned to him with an almost pleading look as she said :—

"Yes, I suppose I would make sacrifices for my friends ; but I don't want my friends to come into my life with disturbing emotions. I dread above all things to have my feelings wrought up."

"I really can't understand how you can get along in the world without having your feelings disturbed ; I don't see how any one can who has any feelings at all."

"Well, perhaps I haven't any feelings ; at any rate, I don't like to be disturbed, and I will not be ; positively, I will not be."

She spoke so earnestly, and with so much evident trouble over what John thought were her imaginary woes, that he broke into a laugh, and assured her that, so far as he was concerned, he had no thought of disturbing her, whatever she might mean by that.

Mrs. Randolph's laugh was very enchanting, but never more so than when she heard John say this ; she was apparently amused at her own intensity.

"How do you like this way of spending the summer?" said John.

"Do you mean sitting here on the cliff?"

"Well, yes; how do you like this?"

"It will do for an hour or so; but an hour or so doesn't make a summer." John thought that she was in a charming mood.

"I suppose, if you could have some one else for the next hour or so, and so on, the whole summer might be as tolerable as this hour has been?"

"Yes, perhaps; and perhaps it might be even pleasanter; after all we are wholly dependent on our environment."

John did not like Mrs. Randolph to take this tone. He held the opinion that her noblest dependence was on herself, and it seemed to him that her dignity was somewhat detracted from whenever she spoke respectfully of her environment. "There you go again," he said, "as if you must draw your spiritual sustenance from outside, as if your own store were not the richest in the world."

"Thank you," she said; "your compliment hasn't much truth at the bottom of it, but it's pleasant nevertheless." John had never before seen her so wilfully frivolous.

"I don't see how you can like the North Shore, then," he said; "I should think you would have selected Newport or even Long Branch. Think what a rich and wholly untried mine of pleasure you would find in the horses and carriages, and perhaps in their human belongings even, at that fashionable resort."

"Perhaps I should have selected a gayer life if I had been consulted, but Mr. Randolph made up his mind that I wanted excessive quiet, and here I am. Besides, I don't like your satire on Long Branch; I have some very good friends who go there."

"Who are they?"

Mrs. Randolph named some people whose stupidity made them especially offensive to John, and he said rather impatiently, "I don't see why you call such people your friends."

"Because they are my friends; but of course, if you object"—

"Don't, please don't say any more; I had no right to speak of them as I did, but I really can't see how they interest you."

Mrs. Randolph reflected a moment, and then answered with some seriousness: "They amuse me, and I like people who please me; some please me in one way and some in another. Those who do as I like to have them do always remain my friends; these people happen to amuse me."

"Is that the best way to secure your friendship?"

"No," she answered thoughtfully; "no, it is not. The best way for one whom I like to retain my friendship is to do what is worthy of him, to strive to please me and to gratify me by making all he can of himself." John knew that she had him in her mind, and for a moment the sense of the value of her friendship brought back the ecstasy which he had enjoyed when she looked

into his eyes after he told her of his great gratitude to her. He looked up at her, and she saw again the flood of feeling overspread his face, as she had seen it long ago, on that night when he bade her good-by on the staircase ; but now she was neither frightened nor disturbed by it ; she had come to recognize too well the stubborn fact that John Rantoul loved her as she had never before known a man to love a woman. But she had set for herself a great task, and, in the meantime, she must prevent any expression of his present feeling, by the ordinary arts which women learn so well to practise.

So she arose hastily from the rock on which she had been seated, and said, "It is time to go to the hotel and find Mr. Randolph. My friends must be like him," she added, smiling ; "they must not wear me out by exciting my emotions ; they must be thoroughly submissive."

John thought that the greatest blessing which could come to him would be thorough submission to so kind and beautiful a mistress. But the two said very little on their way to the hotel. John had passed his first happy moment since his interview with his father. There had at last come a time when the sunshine was strong enough to pierce the black cloud which overhung him. Mrs. Randolph had become something more to him than she had been in Washington ; not only was his love of her an inspiration to him, but her friendship for him was comforting enough to soften his trouble.

CHAPTER XXII.

MAJOR STRAND MAKES AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

MARY PICKERING and her fate had been constantly in John's mind since his father quitted him in anger. The doctor and his son had not spoken to one another since that unpleasant interview. And yet John passed many days in his old home. Nothing that his father could do would now drive him away. More and more he clung to the place, for he determined to shield his mother, as long as possible, from the knowledge of her husband's guilty secret, and to protect his father, if protection were needed or possible, against the effects of his own conduct.

Not many days after his interview with his father John noticed a strange man constantly in the company of Persons. It was the dissolute Strand, who had come to report concerning his errand into Texas. He was still the same man, in dress and manner, that he had been in Washington, and, as he and his peculiarities had been the principal topics of conversation at the village post-office for a month, John's ignorance of the man, and of local conjectures about his business, betrayed the little concern felt by him in the affairs of his native village, and vindicated the justice of the almost general verdict against him.

"Stuck up 's a rhubarb stalk," said Captain Israel Goodsell; and so he was, for he absolutely refused to shake hands with this same captain, on one occasion, because the fisherman's fingers were damp and scaly from the cod which he had been cleaning.

Strand's report was satisfactory. No letter came from Mary while he was visiting his mother; but, in rummaging over some old papers which he found in a bandbox that constituted his mother's only piece of baggage on her removal from North Carolina to Texas, he discovered a note from Mr. Linthicomb, dated about the time of Mary's disappearance from the Strand family. In this note Mr. Linthicomb spoke of his adoption of the child, and told Mrs. Strand that he should give the girl his own family name, and call her Agnes instead of Algaea, which the Strands had bestowed upon her. The "honah, sah," of the major, did not stand in the way of his purloining this valuable piece of property, and he took it to the North with him.

Basswood and Persons were naturally gratified with the success of Strand's mission; but they were apparently in not much of a hurry to make use of it. Having employed him they now desired to rid themselves of him, and they first belittled the value of the paper which he had obtained at so much sacrifice of "honah," and then attempted to make him believe that the property was much smaller than they had supposed. But Strand held on. No paltry sum could buy that paper from him.

When the two lawyers professed to have abandoned the project Strand threatened to find Miss Linthcomb and to reveal his information to her. But the two conspirators laughed at him because he had not discovered who Mr. Linthcomb was or where he lived. Persons knew. He at once recalled Agnes, and then he recollected the picture of her mother which he had often seen in the doctor's house. Its red-gold hair was so like that of Agnes Linthcomb's that he wondered why the likeness had never occurred to John. It had been noticed by John, who, however, saw nothing more than the resemblance. He never pried into mysteries, and had not a particle of detective talent. Even after he had learned that Mary Pickering still lived it was never suggested to him that Agnes Linthcomb might be she.

Strand seemed to be at bay. The other two had tried their information on the doctor, and with sad results. They realized that they would be obliged to proceed cautiously, for it would not do to kill their victim before he disgorged. In the mean time they watched Strand and negotiated with him.

All this was going on after John's interview with his father, and before his visit to Rhododendron. There was no doubt in the young man's mind that this unkempt, slouch-hatted, stranger had something to do with the business, and more than once he was half inclined to speak to him and find out what he knew. Then he concluded that prudence demanded a waiting game, and, besides, he dreaded

fuller knowledge. Strand did not go by his right name in the village, so that Ballard, even, did not suspect his identity.

One morning John drove up to the village post-office to mail a letter. As he stopped his horse he looked about for some one to carry the letter into the office, and Strand approached and offered his services. John thanked the man, hardly noticing him, and drove off. When he had gone Strand looked at the address, and a gleam of intelligence came into his otherwise dull eyes. Depositing the letter in the box, he said: "By gad, majah, you're in luck, sah; Rhododendron aint so far from here as Texas, by gad, sah."

Then the major looked up the road after John's disappearing figure, and wondered what his game had better be. The man whom he watched rode away in the direction opposite to Rhododendron, and the major concluded from this, and from the fact that John had mailed a letter to Miss Linthicomb, that he might as well make a visit to the watering-place, and take a look at his old playmate.

Towards the close of the morning Agnes and Scolly were walking on a shaded road which led to Stonecliff. They were talking of themselves, each eager that the other should know all that there was to tell of life's short story. The reconciliation was complete, and there had been a mutual promise that there should never be another quarrel. There had been no apparent loss of love by reason of the

attrition of the two tempers ; but then the quality of love differs like the quality of glass, — the slightest scratch will ruin a fine French plate, whereas many scars on the commoner article do it no real damage. Not that the love of Agnes and Scolly was very commonplace ; it was a little better than the ordinary every-day affair, which one sees trundling its pledges through the parks of a Sunday, and yawning in weariness of rest. It was a good, honest, love, and with fire in it ; but it was able to stand much harder knocks than it had received and recognized.

“Do you know that Mr. Linthicomb never believed me to be a Strand?” Agnes was saying to Scolly.

“Yes, he has spoken to me on that subject many times ; and he is really very anxious to find out who you are.”

“Do you care who I am, Robert?” There was some solicitude in Miss Linthicomb’s voice and manner as she asked this question ; and she took her lover’s arm, clasping both her hands over it, and looking up at him appealingly.

“No, I don’t care in the way you are thinking of, love ; but I would like to know — well, as a matter of curiosity, and then, you know, it’s well enough to understand what’s back of us, and — yes — and just who we are.”

“You are very good to take me, thinking me a child of those people in North Carolina. But they tried to make me think myself their child, and when Mrs. Strand gave me to Mrs. Linthicomb she said

that I was her daughter. Do you believe I am, Robert? I never felt towards her as I believe I should feel towards my mother; and, besides, I don't look like them, do I?"

"No, Agnes; you certainly don't look like them, judging from what you have mentioned of their physical peculiarities. You've told me, you know, that you've some recollection of another life."

"Yes, but it's so indistinct that I haven't much confidence that it ever existed. It seems to me like those incomprehensible recollections that come to us when we are sure of having before been in precisely the same situation in which we now are, with the same persons about us, doing the same thing,—you know what I mean, don't you, Robert?"

"In a measure," answered Scolly.

"But, Robert," Agnes went on, "what is the use of making any further inquiry? I am satisfied; and you will love me whatever may be discovered?"

"Of course I will, but how many people know you are adopted by the Linthicombs, Agnes?"

"I don't know exactly, but not many. Let me see;—there's my 'mammy,' you know,—of course she knows and a few of the neighbors and relations of the Linthicombs in Virginia. Then there are one or two old friends of Mr. Linthicombs, in Washington, and Marion Randolph. I don't know any one else."

"Do you know, love, I know where there's a perfect picture of you?"

"No; where?"

"In John Rantoul's room, in Boston."

"Oh," answered Agnes, "I know that; he's studied my hair often enough to make a dozen pictures."

"But he didn't paint this picture."

Miss Linthcomb's wide eyes expressed the utmost astonishment as she asked, "Why, who did, then?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No, dear; but there's no mystery about it. The picture is a portrait of John's aunt, painted years ago, when she was a young girl, and the resemblance between you and the portrait is very marked, — the hair especially."

"How curious! Who was John's aunt?"

"She was the doctor's sister; and she married a Mr. Pickering."

"Pickering? Pickering?" repeated Agnes musingly. "It seems to me that I've heard that name."

"I shouldn't wonder if you had," said Scolly with a good-natured laugh. "Every family name in this neighborhood, that isn't Rantoul or Davis, is Pickering."

"Can I see the picture, Robert?" Miss Linthcomb asked. She was still struggling with a far-away memory, which had been awakened by the mention of the name of Pickering.

"I guess so, dear, — some day when we all happen to be in Boston together."

Still later, in the afternoon, a stranger slouched about the piazza of the "Norman House." It was Strand. He recognized John Rantoul as soon as he saw him in Stonecliff, and he recollected that the young man had nearly walked over him, the winter before, in Washington. He recollected, too, the beautiful woman who was John's companion on that day; and, as he had a theory — theories being the major's strong point — that John was in love with Agnes Linthicomb, not knowing their relationship, he somewhat hastily came to the conclusion that Mrs. Randolph and Mary Pickering were the same. Strand had not known Alcathea's real name until Persons told him in Washington; for his father and mother had been impressed by the doctor with a superstitious conviction that ill-luck would befall them if they ever mentioned his own or the girl's name. It happened that Strand saw Mrs. Randolph first, and he studied her very carefully, — so carefully, that she was conscious that the eyes of the stranger were on her. He could not find a single feature in her face which at all recalled his foster-sister, and he had about determined that there were two Agnes Linthicombs in the world, when Agnes herself made her appearance.

"By gad, sah," the major said to himself, in evident approval of his own foresight, "by gad, sah, you knew her, majah, as soon as you cast your eyes on her; who would have thought it?" The major walked up and down the broad piazza, passing

behind the two women, who sat together in the comfortable silence of a perfect mutual understanding, — the one reading, the other musing, and both happy. Mrs. Randolph had long been aware of Strand's presence, and of his eager watchfulness. But all beauties are accustomed to more or less watching and curiosity ; and, moreover, she had good nerves and was not easily annoyed. As the man approached for the third or fourth time she happened to glance up and saw that the present object of his admiration was Miss Linthicomb. Almost at the same moment Agnes discovered that this unkempt stranger was regarding her very intently ; and, not being as equable as Mrs. Randolph, and carrying her feelings nearer the surface, she became restless, and even angry, and, when Strand walked away from them, she said : —

“ That is a most annoying creature.”

“ Does his appreciation of you disturb you ? ” asked Mrs. Randolph with a careless good-humor which did not lighten her companion's exasperation.

“ He's the rudest man I ever saw ; and he's a horrid looking thing, too. I wonder why Mr. Pigeon permits such people to come on the piazza.”

“ I don't suppose that he was invited to come ; but it's rather difficult to drive off well-behaved persons after they are here.”

“ But he's not well-behaved ; he frightens me ; ” and Miss Linthicomb really began to feel alarmed.

In the mean time Strand had convinced himself

that he was looking at the woman whom he had known as a child, and as Algaea Strand. He was certain that this was the Mary Pickering for whom he had been searching all these months. He feasted his eyes, for the major was a man of fine taste in the matter of feminine good looks, although he preferred prettiness to beauty. To a good many souls melody is much more satisfying than harmony. Although the development of the woman had been very fine, Strand, by his close observation, soon traced the resemblance to the child, and saw the girl with whom he used to play in the mountains of North Carolina in the charming creature before him. Dissipation sometimes breeds a sentimentalism which is false and temporary, but which, for the moment and in weak natures, supplies the place of the true feeling. As Strand thought of the early days in the mountains, and of the gentle child whom he loved more than he ever loved anything except a colt or a shot-gun, his weak eyes turned longingly to Agnes, and unfortunately it was just at this moment that she chanced to look up and see him.

When she said that the man frightened her, Mrs. Randolph suggested a walk on the cliff, and down to the cove, where they might meet Scolly, who had been fishing all day out in the bay. As the two women went off the piazza the man looked after them. For a moment he was possessed of an honest thought. It was of telling Agnes all he knew of her identity, that she might secure her own property, and that the

two knaves who were bent on defrauding her, as well as the doctor and himself, might be defeated. With this thought in his mind, — a thought, however, which had not developed into purpose, — Strand walked slowly after the two women, following them at a respectful distance, but still so evidently keeping them in sight that Miss Linthicomb became very much alarmed.

"Do let us go back," she said to Mrs. Randolph.

"Why?" Mrs. Randolph herself did not half like the constancy of this dissolute shadow; but she was determined not to exhibit any fear, both for the sake of her timid companion and because she believed that it would be better to fully develop the stranger's intentions, and end all uncertainty about him at once. She considered that one of the worst evils which could befall them would be the daily presence of this undefined fear.

"Because," answered Agnes, "because — why its safe there, any way."

"Do you think it would be wise to let every inquisitive stranger break up our walks and our pleasures?"

"But I'll speak to Mr. Scolly about it, and he'll put a stop to the annoyance."

"My dear child, Mr. Scolly can't be here all the time, you know; that might interfere with our pleasure, too."

Meanwhile the two women moved on down the road, which ran through a pleasant wood to the

beach. In the shaded stillness of this wood Strand's better nature came very near overmastering him, and once or twice he quickened his steps and approached nearer to Mrs. Randolph and Agnes. Even Mrs. Randolph was now apprehensive, and Agnes was in a state of nervous trepidation which almost forced her to run. She looked about wildly for some place of escape; but the woods were on either side of them, and, instead of offering friendly shelter, suggested opportunities for the villain to make what she was sure was his intended attack on two defenceless women. It was wonderful how hateful the pleasant smell of the woods and the golden patches of sunlight on the undergrowth became to her. It was too late to turn back,—to do so would only hasten the end. All this time the hideous highway robber was under the command of softer feelings than he had known for many years. He was wondering how he might best approach Miss Linthicomb and tell her that she was Mary Pickering, and entitled to the property which John Rantoul's father had stolen from her. Just as the grateful wash of the tide was sounding in the ears of the two frightened women, and Agnes was preparing to run out on the beach and into the clear light where her lover might see her and come to her rescue, Strand advanced, and, taking off his hat, said to her, "I sincerely beg yo' pardon, madam, for what may seem"—

He went no further, for Agnes broke away from Mrs. Randolph's supporting arm, and dashed out on

the beach with a cry that awoke the echoes, while Mrs. Randolph walked on with more stateliness, but, perhaps, with not much less gratitude for the friendly protection of the clear beach and the neighboring wharf, where human beings might be found. Agnes's scream was, for a long time, considered by all her immediate friends as a well-considered and thoughtful effort, and as leading to one of the most fortunate events in her experience; for, just as she uttered it, Scolly and Mr. Randolph were drawing up their dory on the beach, and the two men hastened to the relief of the distressed female, whoever she might be. As soon as Scolly discovered Miss Linthicomb, he was "that excited," said an old boatman who was near, but who had such a consciousness of the lofty remoteness of the class to which Mrs. Randolph and Agnes appertained, that he would have never obtruded his assistance upon them, "he was that excited, I vum, I thought he'd swear."

Agnes could only point at Strand, who came out of the edge of the woods in a faltering way, and, with a propitiatory smile on his face, — a smile which indicated that now that "two gen'l'men" had met, the unpleasant little episode could be explained in a manner which would be perfectly satisfactory to "gen'l'men." But Scolly was blind to smiles, and saw only the hang-dog look, and the general air of need and dissipation in Strand's appearance.

When the dilapidated major stood before Scolly, the weak, bloated face and shambling gait and

seedy dignity of the one contrasted strongly with the fresh vigor and fine carriage of the other. It was the civilization of New England against the lowest social order of the South, although the local newspaper, in reporting the incident, did speak of a "characteristic assault made on two defenceless ladies, by a representative of Southern chivalry." Although Scolly was very angry he was not rash. He had time to reflect that women are often needlessly alarmed, and that he lived in Boston, where judgment is supreme.

Strand recognized Scolly, as he had recognized John, from the one glance which he had had of him on the street in Washington; so he assumed an air of friendly recollection, and doubted not that he was on the way out of his difficulties. He held out a hand which Scolly did not see, both of his own being in his pockets, and said:—

"Indeed, sah, this is a very fortunate circumstance,—an accident, sah, which I am in position to fully appreciate," and he laughed a little nervously, but with the air of one in whom reaction had developed a joke.

"You have a curious view of a fortunate circumstance, my friend. Agnes, what did this fellow do?" Scolly was now a tribunal, self-constituted, it is true, but nevertheless perfectly competent.

Before Agnes began her story, Strand said, "I think, sah, I've had the honoh of seeing you befo'" —

"Well, perhaps you have," said Scolly, with a cold harshness. "But I don't want to hear your voice again until I ask you to speak." Strand, still feebly smiling, could answer only with a trembling, "Yes, sah ; beg pahdon ;" in which he was interrupted by Scolly, with, "See here, my man, if I hear that voice of yours again I'll throttle you."

Although Strand's manner was still cringing, there was an angry flash in his eye ; and when Scolly turned to Agnes, and again asked her to tell him what had happened, the major drew himself up with an air of great dignity.

Agnes's story was not very coherent, and yet there was enough in it about Strand's following the two women on their walk, and of his impudent staring at them on the hotel piazza, to make Scolly very angry ; and Mrs. Randolph, who had recovered her equanimity and reflected on the incident, made up her mind to save Strand from any physical consequences of his inexplicable conduct.

As Agnes finished her narrative Scolly's hands came out of his pockets, and Scolly's lips were tight shut. He made a motion towards the humble Strand, but Mrs. Randolph interposed, "I really saw nothing, now that I think the whole matter over, Mr. Scolly, that justified our excessive alarm. I fancy the man did not intend to harm us."

"No," added Mr. Randolph, who had been standing quietly by his wife and taking the whole matter into a much clearer mind than the temporary

tribunal possessed. "No, it's very evident that the fellow has more insolence than malice, and we'd best just warn him off, and let him go at that."

The look of gratitude with which Strand greeted Mrs. Randolph's friendly interposition changed to one of sullenness when he heard her husband's words. He began to speak again : —

"I assure you, sah," —

"Shut up!" thundered Scolly; "and thank your stars that you're not handed over to the police."

"Yes, do let him go, Robert; do let him go, and don't let's have any more trouble about him," begged Agnes. "Only don't let him come here again."

Scolly reflected a moment. His sense of justice was so great that he could not think of permitting the man to go unpunished, but he compromised with a reprimand.

"You're very lucky, my man," he said, "that I didn't knock you down as soon as I saw you; but this isn't the place for you; the climate isn't conducive to your general welfare, and you'd better quit the place. Now go! Do you hear me?" — as Strand's lips moved as if he was about to speak. "Go!" and Scolly pointed significantly up the road down which the major had followed the two women. Strand, noticing that there was still inclination on Scolly's part to deal with him more harshly, slouched off.

When he got well into the woods he betrayed the rage which he had concealed while in Scolly's pres-

ence. He kicked viciously at the stones in the highway, tore twigs off the bushes, dashed his hat into the road, and jammed it on his head again, looked about him to see that no one was near, and furtively called Scolly, "a damned Yankee, sah;" finally muttering: —

"Young man, you and that girl have lost the most valuable piece of information, sah, that'll ever be offered to you. Majah, you've been insulted, sah, and you'll have your revenge, sah; yes, sah, you'll have your revenge!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CONFESSION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

THIS was the letter which Strand mailed for John Rantoul :—

MY DEAR MISS LINTHICOMB, —

Ever since the perfect day which I spent at Rhododendron, I have been thinking of your words of warning, — for that they were intended as such I have no doubt. Perhaps I did not make it clear to you that I am very thankful for the interest in me which those words indicate. I feel that you were taking a friend's privilege, and your friendship has come to be very dear to me.

Although you did not say so you intimated your belief that I love Mrs. Randolph, and you tried to bring me to a sense of the danger of love of a woman who is already married. I must acknowledge that you have reason for your belief. I do love Marion Randolph. I try to think of words that shall tell you of the depth of my feeling, but I cannot. I cannot formulate the strong pulsations of my heart. To tell me to stop loving is like telling me to stop breathing. My love pervades my life, and has become part of it; and, though it must bring me great misery, and though now I recognize in advance that my life can never be crowned with the highest happiness, — that I can never gain the richest prize, — I would not surrender my love for all the fame and all the riches of the world. Nothing could tempt me to forego the glory of having loved this splendid woman. I do not suppose you can realize it; but it is nevertheless true that I would rather go to my grave with the joy and grief of this hopeless love in my heart than with any other possession that the world can give. I am, indeed, very often in such

depths of despair and anguish as, I imagine, few have ever known; but then again the ecstasy which fills my soul lifts me to table-lands higher than it has been given to many hearts to mount.

But why do I write all this to you to whom love has brought only happy contentment? Perhaps, however, you can understand how dear my grief is to me when the gladness of loving greatly goes with it.

I have confessed my love to you because you have recognized it. I cannot escape it, and why should I fly from her? She is in no danger. I shall never tell her of my love, and why should I not have the consolation of her presence so long as there shall come no harm to her? I would not need to be warned away if I thought that my love would, in the slightest, blight her beautiful life.

Very sincerely yours,

JOHN RANTOUL.

When Agnes Linthicomb read this letter she was greatly troubled; but, for the first time since her engagement, she determined not to confide in Scolly. She had observed that her lover wholly disapproved of John, and more than once he intimated that he had been wofully mistaken in his old friend.

"Why don't he go away? There's something wrong about a man who falls in love with a married woman; but, if he does get into the scrape, he ought to be manly enough to go away from her forever."

Agnes agreed with Scolly that John ought not to have come to Rhododendron, but she disapproved of the harsh terms in which he pronounced his judgment. She even tried to accept John's view of himself and the situation; but her brain was altogether

too clear ; she could not. She did not believe that he could refrain from telling, in words, the love which he had told in looks and actions more than once. At last she determined to make an appeal to Marion, so she went to her room, and found her alone, for Mr. Randolph was, as usual, fishing in the bay.

Mrs. Randolph greeted her by asking if she had entirely recovered from her fright of the day before, and, on hearing that the effect of the alarm had disappeared, said, "But why are you so very serious, then?"

"Because I have something serious on my mind," Agnes replied.

"It seems to me, Agnes, that lately you are oftener serious than otherwise."

"I am, I suppose, because" —

"But I don't want to know why. I don't like you to be serious. I want you to be amusing ; that's why I brought you here."

Agnes did not respond to Mrs. Randolph's pleasant mood. In truth, Mrs. Randolph had an instinctive knowledge that Agnes was distressed about John Rantoul, and she was determined to avoid discussion with her. She could not take the girl into her confidence ; she could not let it be known that she recognized John's love of her ; for to do so would be to stand self-condemned before the world of large exactions and small ideals. Therefore she contended against Agnes's intention, parrying her serious moods with a gayety the unreality of which did not escape Miss Linthcomb.

This morning, however, Agnes was determined to speak. John's letter betrayed a most dangerous state of affairs. She must save him, and she had also a duty to the Randolphs. Even as she leaned forward, however, with so fixed a purpose in her face that Mrs. Randolph saw the futility of further attempts to avoid a disagreeable conversation, the girl could not help feeling vexed that Mr. Randolph had not discovered the condition of affairs and performed the task which, therefore, devolved on her. But, above all else, she was dutiful.

"Marion, you must listen to me," she said.

Mrs. Randolph's manner became at once more natural and more dignified as she answered, "I am always ready to listen to you when you are really in earnest. I thought perhaps that your seriousness arose from some of the trifling ills of which life is so full. I hope my lightness hasn't annoyed you."

"Marion, I think we ought to go away from here."

"Why, dear?"

Agnes Linthicomb was a brave woman, but she hesitated to tell what she knew must be revealed. She looked into Mrs. Randolph's face, as if seeking there a sign of encouragement; but she saw only grave eyes of wondering inquiry, and she cried out, almost in despair:—

"O Marion! do you not know? Do you not see the awful thing that is going on, and that your presence here is helping?"

"Don't speak in enigmas, Agnes. If my staying here is promoting any wickedness of course I shall leave ; but, really, I have never before been told that I was an inspiration to crime."

It wrung Mrs. Randolph's heart to so wilfully misinterpret Agnes's words, but she was still determined to avoid, if possible, all discussion of John Rantoul's love. She believed in the dignity and worthiness of her own feelings and purposes ; but she knew that Agnes could not appreciate them, and she was not inclined either to surrender them, or to permit a suspicion that she would tolerate an ordinary love from any man but her husband.

"I don't think you are promoting wickedness, Marion, — you know I don't." Agnes spoke anxiously ; she was very much afraid that she could not bring herself to the point of urging a flight from John Rantoul, and she saw that Mrs. Randolph was, for some reason, determined not to assist her.

"But you have certainly more than intimated that I am helping along some wickedness," and then, after patting Agnes's hand affectionately, she went on : "Suppose, dear, you keep that wickedness to yourself. I shall be the happier if I am ignorant of what I am promoting, and you will not be happy at all if I go on promoting it after I recognize it and my own connection with it."

Agnes was not gratified by this show of kindness. There was a certain distance of manner about Mrs. Randolph which forbade, plainly enough, any reference

to the subject which she had at heart. Mrs. Randolph had no doubt as to Agnes Linthicomb's purpose. She had foreseen that she must battle for the carrying out of her intentions, and she had determined that only one person should discuss her conduct with her. She admitted Mr. Randolph's right to know her purpose; and, although she felt that he would not comprehend her relations with John Rantoul any better than he had always understood any of her thoughts and feelings, she believed that he had sufficient faith in her self-control, and in her lack of emotion, to permit her to carry out her designs unchecked, and without a pang of the unhappiness of jealousy.

On receiving this check Miss Linthicomb stopped talking, and, drawing her hand out of Mrs. Randolph's reach, remained with her for a moment in that uncomfortable mood which tears its possessor with a desire to show that offence has been given, without exhibiting too much anger, and without closing the door to immediate reconciliation. Mrs. Randolph, however, was apparently intending not to return to the subject which Agnes had introduced; and, after addressing two or three unimportant remarks to her companion, to which she obtained monosyllabic replies uttered in grieved tones, she calmly took up a book and began reading, whereupon Agnes went out of the room.

Naturally she first went to her own room to cry, and then in search of Scolly. Now that Mrs. Ran-

dolph had closed her ears, and would not run away from John's love, she was obliged to resort to the man whose counsels she had at first rejected. She found him, arrayed in a flannel shirt and knickerbockers, starting out for a walk around the cape; and, being in those excellent spirits which appear to be inseparable from a healthy nature which hasn't many demands upon it, he called out to her, "Agnes, why don't you take a walk with me? It's only fifteen miles around, and you ought to be able to do it."

Then he came nearer to her, and saw that her eyes were red with weeping. "Why, what's the matter, dear? Haven't you recovered from yesterday's fright?" he went on.

"Yes, indeed, Robert; it's not that that troubles me," Miss Linthicomb replied, mournfully. "Can't you put off your walk a little while? I want to talk with you."

Putting off a bit of exercise was to Scolly like giving up a good dinner or any other necessary material comfort; but so much in love was he with Miss Linthicomb that he willingly consented to remain with her. There really was nothing that Scolly would not have undertaken for the sake of the woman he was about to marry, although nature had made it impossible for him to surrender gracefully so vital a thing as a fifteen-mile tramp on a pleasant morning.

As the two walked away from the hotel in search

of a shady spot, Scolly said, "I trust you are not in very much trouble."

"But I am, Robert," and Miss Linthicomb's tears began to fall, much to the embarrassment of her lover, who was always mute in the presence of deep suffering, such as he imagined Agnes's to be. But, as the silence became too oppressive, and as Agnes's tears developed into sobs, he felt speech to be necessary, so he said, soothingly:—

"There, there, my love, don't spoil your eyes with weeping; let me know what troubles you."

After a few more sobs, and some additional but silent soothing, Agnes managed to tell Scolly the story of John's love of Mrs. Randolph, and the confessions of the letter which she had received that morning. When Scolly heard about this letter he asked to see it, and, when he had read it, he was moved to make this strong exclamation: "The man's a scoundrel!"

But Agnes could not permit John to be spoken of in this manner, and yet she could not be angry with her honorable lover for looking at the matter as the world would look at it. It was because she had known that Scolly would take the ordinary view that she had hesitated to tell him her story, until Mrs. Randolph's refusal to listen to her forced her back upon him. She made a soft answer with the commendable purpose of turning away wrath: "No, Robert; John Rantoul is not a scoundrel. He is

simply a very unfortunate man, and I am afraid he will always be very unhappy."

"Well, if it isn't scoundrelism to fall in love with another man's wife I don't know what it is."

"Robert, it won't do for us to talk about John in this way."

"My dear Agnes, I know it won't, because you will persist in defending a man who is wholly in the wrong."

Upon hearing these words Agnes again burst into tears, and, on Scolly's making a kindly overture, drew away from him with some impatience, saying:—

"I'm sorry that I've told you anything about it."

"Why, love?"

"Because — because — you don't love me well enough to try to help me get John out of his difficulty without making unkind remarks about him."

"But, Agnes!"

But Agnes continued to weep and sob, and Scolly became concerned about his own affairs; he did not desire a repetition of the unfortunate quarrel. Finally he said, though with a rather cloudy brow, "Well, Agnes, I won't make any more remarks about the man; but what can we do?"

"I don't know," answered Agnes after a while, wiping her eyes; "I came to ask you what we could do. Mrs. Randolph won't do anything. I've been to see her;" and then she recounted the story of her morning's talk with Mrs. Randolph, giving Scolly her interpretation of its unsatisfactory conclusion.

"I don't see what evidence you have that she knew what you were going to say," was Scolly's answer.

"Why, she knows that John loves her," answered Agnes.

"I suppose she must."

"Must! Hasn't she as much as admitted it?"

"I didn't know that," said Scolly.

Then Agnes told him of her interview with Mrs. Randolph after John's hasty flight from Washington.

"Still there's a good deal of guessing about it, isn't there?" asked Scolly.

"It's very evident that you haven't much imagination," impatiently retorted Miss Linthicomb.

"I never knew that imagination was of much use in practical affairs," said Scolly; "but," he went on, "let's avoid disagreements, let's assume that she knows that he's in love with her; what then?"

"Why, she knows that I am concerned about it; that I showed my anxiety to go away from Rhododendron as soon as I found out that you had told John that we were here; and she must know that it's been on my mind ever since. O Robert! what can we do?"

Scolly, having made up his mind to help Agnes out in her charitable intentions for John, thought over the situation calmly, and without any anger. At last he said, "Do you think that Mrs. Randolph is in love with John Rantoul?"

"No indeed," answered Agnes, "she's as much

in love with Mr. Randolph as she can be with any man."

"Cool hand, isn't she?" was Scolly's comment.

"What do you mean, Robert?"

"I mean that if you're right, she's just what I always thought her."

"What?"

"She's as cold as ice; she doesn't care how many men wreck their lives by being in love with her. She's the worst kind of a flirt."

Miss Linthicomb was angry again. "Robert Scolly, I've told you once before that you have no comprehension of John Rantoul, and now I feel obliged to tell you that you don't know—you haven't the slightest idea—of Marion Randolph. But," she pleaded, — for she had this affair too much at heart to permit anything to come between her purpose and its accomplishment, — "don't let's talk about them; let's get them out of their trouble."

"It seems to me," suggested Scolly, — who did not enjoy this small opinion of him any the more because it was held by the woman who was about to become his wife, — "It seems to me that you can't discuss the affair very well, without saying more or less about the people who are engaged in it."

"Yes, I know," answered Agnes, but let's get them out of their trouble, and then we can drop them, or at least, you can if you like."

"Agreed," said Scolly, "we'll just think of them as a couple of units that have got badly mixed up."

The anticipation of the pleasure of working out John's salvation, against what she regarded as the perverse blindness of Marion Randolph, dried Miss Linthicomb's tears, and even went so far as to wreath her pretty lips with a little smile, which, notwithstanding a suggestion of sadness, was nevertheless a smile. "Well," she said, when she had waited some time for Scolly to speak, "what is your plan?"

"Why, I haven't any; I don't keep plans around ready made for the preservation of people who get into such scrapes. I thank God"—

"You needn't go on." Miss Linthicomb playfully put her hand over Scolly's mouth as she said this. "I'm sorry you can't think of a plan—no, I'm glad, for now we can think of something together."

"I thought that we always did that," said Scolly.

"So we do; but I mean it will be so very nice to think of something important; it's like beginning our lives together, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear; it's very sweet."

Then Scolly took Agnes's hand, and became even more satisfied with existence than he would have been if he were making five miles an hour on a tramp round the cape. After a while he said:—

"Agnes, after all, I think the best way to do is to have a talk with Randolph and another with John. That's the manly way, and I'll undertake to have the

talks not only for the sake of my love, but of my old friendship for Rantoul."

"I suppose there really is nothing else to be done ; but I hate to have Mr. Randolph troubled about it ; — if it will trouble him," she sagaciously added. As she spoke she thought that it would do no good to speak to John, who was evidently bent on destroying his life, but he might as well understand how concerned his friends were about him. As to Mr. Randolph she knew that he would do precisely as his wife said. Still there was some satisfaction in feeling that the warning which weighed upon her like a duty was about to be given. She had only a word of caution for Scolly, and that was to refrain from quarrelling with John ; to which Scolly mentally responded that John might quarrel or not, as he saw fit ; as for himself he would do his duty, come what might, and lay bare the baseness of John's conduct.

Agnes was right about the effect of Scolly's revelation on Mr. Randolph. When the even-tempered, practical man of affairs had listened to the rather blunt narration of Miss Linthcomb's lover, he simply replied : " Well, I'm devilish sorry for Rantoul. I don't like him overmuch. He hasn't any common sense, and he has an uncomfortable way of showing that he despises people who have. But he's a good fellow in his way, I suppose, and he's a man who takes love hard." Mr. Randolph's idea that love resembles the measles did not astonish Scolly, who

thought that he, too, took the disease pretty hard, but reflected, with a cheerful serenity, that he had it in perfectly proper form.

Scolly could not say anything about the letter which Miss Linthicomb had received from John, but he hesitatingly hoped that Rantoul had not annoyed Mrs. Randolph, at the same time expressing a fear that, if she remained in the neighborhood, she might find the young man's passion for her troublesome.

Mr. Randolph had no idea, however, of quitting such good fishing, and so irresponsible and quiet a life as was afforded at Rhododendron, for the simple, insufficient, reason that John had fallen in love with his wife. Other men had been victims to her beauty, since her marriage with him, and he was perfectly certain that John would never be permitted to do anything or say anything, which would give a moment's uneasiness to Mrs. Randolph.

"My dear boy," he said to Scolly, with the philosophical air of a man of the world, "when you grow older, and have been married as long as I have, you will learn that your wife's beauty will be quite as attractive to men as it is to you in these salad days. Men will continue to fall in love with her to the end of the chapter, but the loves of such men don't last long; they are not founded on judgment; they don't take the future into consideration at all. They are superficial people, whose hearts are not controlled by common sense. You cannot run away from such men; they are everywhere;

and Mrs. Randolph knows how to take care of this young man, as your wife will know, as all women who love their husbands well enough, and have self-respect, always do know."

This ended Scolly's effort in that direction, and the result made him all the more determined to speak to John as strongly as the necessities of the case demanded.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DETERMINED TO REMAIN IN DANGER.

SCOLLY did not find it necessary to go to Stone-cliff to see John. There had not been many days, after the delightful meeting on the cliff, which had not found Rantoul at Rhododendron. He understood Mrs. Randolph, as she understood herself, and gladly accepted the situation. Both of them were very happy in their renewed intercourse. They did not talk much of themselves, but of the nature about them, of books, of other human lives. They read the same things, and were as congenial as they had been a year before at Mt. Desert. Who can tell when the first seed of a great love is sown; and who can recognize the sweet danger of an intellectual sympathy?

Occasionally, Mrs. Randolph would arouse herself, as if shaking off the effects of a pleasant dream, and repeat her protestations against any disturbance of her tranquillity, which she professed to value very highly; in fact, she said that it was perfect placidity and repose that her comfort depended on. John finally came to understand that she was afraid that he might be making her too much part of his own life, and that she desired to tell him that she must

not be a sharer even in the knowledge of his feeling for her. And all the time and everywhere she spoke to him of the beauties of an intellectual love, and John, as his own mind rejoiced in the stimulating influence of hers, did not heed the admonitions of his heart. It is true, that, when he touched her hand, he felt a thrill throughout his body; and, sometimes, even while she spoke, he would miss her thought in the contemplation of her beautiful face. The consciousness of his love of Mrs. Randolph was always with him, and yet he persuaded himself that there would be no further revelation of it; that in time it might develop into an ideal friendship, like that in which she had faith; and, meanwhile, he would be silent; she should never know of his love.

More than once before he wrote his letter to Agnes Linthicomb, John gave Mrs. Randolph assurance that he would never tell her of his love; and she was a good deal comforted by his words and by the sincerity of his manner when he uttered them.

He had spoken generally, it is true, saying, "If I loved a woman whom I could not marry I would never tell her of my love. It would be hard to refrain, I know; but a man who is unfortunate enough to fall in love in that way must take his punishment."

And she was content with that declaration, and he imagined that he had given forth a noble utterance, as if he did not confess his love in every tone of his voice, in every glance of his eye, nay, in the very pledge

that he would not speak of it in words ; and as if she did not recognize the love as plainly as if he had poured forth his soul in the most passionate speech.

They sailed over the bay and into the harbor ; they rambled through the woods ; they sat on the rocks high up above the voices of the other pilgrims to the sea ; each looked into the other's eyes and heard the other's voice and breathed the same atmosphere that made the other happy, and each found contentment in the other's presence. And yet Mrs. Randolph believed that she was overcoming that love of her which would make the world buzz with scandal, if it knew of it. And the world at Rhododendron did begin to buzz. There were jocular and serious hints that John was in love with Mrs. Randolph. Sly insinuations were spoken even in the presence of the man ; but no one ever dreamed of daring to suggest a suspicion to the woman. Mr. Randolph had seen John's infatuation long before Scolly spoke to him, and he had begun to wonder a little why his wife permitted such an open exhibition of devotion. He thought that it was almost time for him to speak ; but the more he reflected the less inclined he was to question his wife's calm judgment on a matter about which she knew much more than he. After Scolly's revelation he again thought of speaking a word of caution, but a day or two went by before John came over to Rhododendron, and Mr. Randolph, whose purpose was not born of jealousy, neglected his opportunities, and at last

came to the satisfying conclusion that he would wait for a time, and watch the affair.

On the third day after the letter John came to Rhododendron, and went out sailing with Mrs. Randolph and Agnes Linthicomb. The two other men were fishing as usual, and the three in the boat, which John managed with the skill of a youth bred on Cape Ann, were not exactly comfortable. Miss Linthicomb had gone, first, because she could not well refuse; and, second, because she had a duty to perform. Of course she was as silently disagreeable to her supposed beneficiaries as purely dutiful people with their occupation immediately in hand always are. In the presence of her chilling commonplaces John and Mrs. Randolph were almost frozen into inarticulateness, and were very glad when the sail was over. On reaching the hotel Miss Linthicomb complaining of a headache, went to her room, and the other two were left alone on the shady side of the piazza. John had been made keenly alive to the fact that Agnes Linthicomb did not approve of his intention to go on seeing Mrs. Randolph. He could not understand her objection, because he thought he had made his motives and purposes perfectly clear in his letter. He began to fear that her conscientiousness might lead her to betray him. Perhaps she had betrayed him already. He looked at Mrs. Randolph and tried to draw from her face the secret of her thoughts; there was no expression there but of absent-mindedness; apparently the sail

had been as dispiriting to her as to him. Then he concluded to question her, and he asked, —

“Do you think many people can comprehend an unselfish love?”

Mrs. Randolph looked at him inquiringly, and he saw that she was wondering if he were about to step beyond the danger line, so he added hastily, “You know—we have both of us said it often enough, that very few people are capable of being greatly in love. I think even those who are not, if they are fairly intelligent, understand that; but do you think when ordinary people—average men and women—are in the presence of a great passion, that the restraint which its possessors can impose upon it, is known to them?”

“Probably not,” said Mrs. Randolph, with an air of relief. All such words as these which John had just spoken were declarations to her of a love in whose genuineness and sufficiency she thoroughly believed; and yet they were also confirmations of her confidence in the self-control of her lover.

“Probably not,” she said; “but it is hardly worth while to consider that question.” And then she went off into a revery, for the termination of which John waited the more patiently because he had some thoughts of his own to occupy him.

“Do you know you are doing too much dreaming?” she finally said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because I think you are. What are you

accomplishing? You tell me that I've a very fine influence over you, and that I make you do worthy work; but where are the results? I haven't seen any since you've been here."

"Why, I haven't been here so very long; and a man might be permitted some vacation."

"So he might; but it isn't very flattering to the woman who, he says, is an inspiration to him, that he should choose his time for idling when he is in her society."

"But I'm filling myself with beautiful thoughts and images," he replied; "isn't that accomplishing something?"

Mrs. Randolph answered, "Yes, that is all well enough; but why can you not show me something tangible before I go away from here?"

"Are you going very soon?" John was startled by the thought, which came suddenly upon him, that the time when he must be separated from Mrs. Randolph could not be very distant.

"In a week or ten days, I imagine; Mr. Randolph will not want to fish much longer than that, I fancy."

As John was about to reply Scolly came on the piazza, and saw his old friend leaning forward towards Mrs. Randolph with so much wistfulness in his face that it was evident to the prudent monitor that he must speak at once. John was telling Mrs. Randolph how sad it was for him to hear anything of her departure, and was promising to try to give

her some evidence of the truthfulness of his asseverations before she went away, when Scolly approached.

Mrs. Randolph saw at a glance that Miss Linthcomb's lover had something of more than usual importance on his mind. It was a mind that easily betrayed any sense of the importance of unusual burdens, and Mrs. Randolph was convinced that Agnes had talked John and herself over with Scolly. This annoyed her so much that she almost immediately went away. She could not bear to think that her private affairs had been confidentially discussed with Scolly.

When the two men were alone together, Scolly said, not heeding a trifling question of John's about his luck at fishing, "I have something to say to you, Rantoul."

John was more amused than surprised by the solemnity of Scolly's manner, supposing that his friend had a lecture on indolence and imprudence to deliver; so he said, resignedly, "Well, go on, old man; but make it as short as you consistently can."

After a slight hesitation Scolly said, abruptly, "See here, Rantoul, this has gone far enough."

"The deuce it has," answered John, laughing good-naturedly.

"Yes, quite far enough." Scolly was under the impression that he had made everything very clear, and he was provoked that John should be cheerful while undergoing trial for his enormous offence.

But John laughed again as he said "Well, now

that you've relieved your feelings by your vigor, I shall be much obliged if you'll tell me what it is that has gone the necessary length."

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Rantoul."

"I do,—do I?" John might have suspected Scolly's meaning if he had been conscious that his attentions to Mrs. Randolph were more than was seemly; but then, too, he would have doubted Scolly's having the impudence to speak to him on the subject. "I don't like your tone, Scolly," he continued, "and when I ask you to explain yourself I think you might consent to do it."

"Well, if you must be spoken to more plainly, Rantoul, you are altogether too attentive to Mrs. Randolph."

John could not have been more astonished if Scolly had struck him. There was an angry sound in his voice as he asked, "Did Mr. Randolph send you here, or did Mrs. Randolph ask you to take the place of her natural protector?"

Scolly recognized the apparent soundness of this position, because he had thought of it himself; but he had also reflected that the circumstances of this case were very exceptional. Therefore he said "That's a very fair question; but the fact is that Mr. Randolph is careless, and doesn't seem to mind whether you are in love with his wife or not; and to tell the truth"—

"You might as well stop just where you are," in-

interrupted John, "I know what you are going to say, and if any one else had hinted it I should feel very much like knocking him down."

"Do you think it honorable to make love to another man's wife?"

John had risen and was walking up and down the piazza. Every time he passed Scolly he looked at him with an expression of supreme contempt.

"Scolly," he finally said, "you've been my friend a good while, and you're the last man in the world I want to quarrel with; but you and I can't talk on this subject. The best thing for you to do is to keep your hands off."

"If you want to retain my friendship you will go away from this neighborhood."

"Why should I do that?" John asked very calmly.

"Because you will make a villain of yourself if you stay." Scolly was angry, and spoke with great excitement.

"Under the circumstances I don't think I want to retain your friendship unless you abandon your intention to take charge of my affairs."

"I can't consent to neglect my duty for any one."

Saying this Scolly went away, and John resumed his seat. It had not been a pleasant day, for he knew that two very dear friendships had been sacrificed to his love; still, as Mrs. Randolph was left to him, he did not feel so much alone in the world. When he bade her good-by that evening there was a

good deal of self-consciousness in his manner, but she was even more than usually kind to him.

When they were alone Mr. Randolph said to his wife : —

"It's too bad about Rantoul." There was sympathy in his voice, as well as in his words ; he spoke as he would have alluded to a friend's loss of a good slice of his fortune by a depression in the stock market.

"What is too bad?" asked his wife in return. She was arranging her hair, and her husband, lying on the lounge in her dressing-room, was wrapped in admiration of her, and was thinking that, after all, John would have been very insensible to her charms, if he had not fallen in love with her.

"What is too bad? Why, that he is so dead in love with you."

She finished braiding her hair before she made her response. In fact, she was thinking how she might answer, not only without disturbing her husband, but in such a way as to assure him that no harm to him or to herself would come from John's worship of her, while much good might result to John. When Mr. Randolph said that John loved her it was the first time she had ever heard those words. Agnes Linthicomb's allusions to the subject had been indirect, and now that Mrs. Randolph listened to the expression of John's feeling she experienced an indescribable delight, which, for a moment, she did not analyze or attempt to suppress. Pres-

ently, however, she became fearful, and taking herself sharply in hand, compelled herself to fancy that she was glad to receive a confirmation of John's capacity for dumbness. If he already loved her so much, she reasoned, as to betray himself to her excellent, though non-observant, husband, and was still silent, it was very evident that he was beginning to appreciate how much more important was her companionship than the momentary gratification which might come from the confession of his love.

Her reflections did not last many minutes, and when she finished them she turned to Mr. Randolph, and said, with her charming smile : —

"I tell you frankly, that I am not surprised that you have spoken to me about this. Mr. Rantoul does have a strong affection for me. I have known it a long time — not that he has ever made confession — I don't think he ever will ; but I've seen it as you have. At first I was troubled and alarmed about it, because I liked him too well to see him spoil our friendship, with complacency. But as he seems no nearer spoiling it now than he was last winter, I've an idea that his chief pleasure comes from the fact that I give his mind a stimulus that he has never had before. I don't think there's any danger, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mr. Randolph resignedly, "If you're satisfied, I am. I was afraid he might be troublesome. Good-night." And with these words the good man kissed his wife and went away.

But he did not half like the comradeship of the two, after all. He had an unformulated sensation that really amounted to a rudimentary jealousy. Before he went to bed he walked out into the moonlight to smoke. Scolly was outside, too; he was suffering still from the rebuff with which he had met in his endeavor to oblige Agnes Linthicomb by saving John. The two men sat together and said nothing. They did not want to hear each other's voices, but silent propinquity was pleasant to them. When Mr. Randolph went into the house, after throwing the burned-out cigar as far from him as possible, he said:—

"Scolly, I imagine there are a good many more fools than devils among men; good-night."

When Scolly heard Mr. Rantoul say this he smiled with a rather superior bitterness, and said to himself "Yes, my friend, and you're one of the worst of them."

CHAPTER XXV.

MR. RANTOUL MAKES AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

THE reminder that Mrs. Randolph's days at Rhododendron were numbered made John alive to the necessity of doing something which would show her that she had really been an inspiration to him. He had been simply basking in the sunshine of a rediscovered friendship, and making himself serenely happy by permitting his heart to exhale its love as generously as it would. He was feeling the joyousness of merely loving. Now that she had reminded him of his declarations concerning the benign influence which she exerted over him, and of their non-fulfilment, he determined to prove to her that he had not uttered them idly. In truth he was solicitous lest she should take him for a babbler, and in the end despise his love and withdraw her friendship. He possessed, indeed, such an ambition as he had never before known anything of, and yet he did not understand how to make it available. There came to him no subject large enough for his purpose.

John had become a puzzle to his mother. She wondered how he could be happy. When he announced that Agnes Linthicomb was in Rhododen-

dron she expected that he would at once fly from a neighborhood where he would be constantly haunted by the sad memory of his disappointed love. The least that she expected was that he would not see the unappreciative woman who had rejected him for so commonplace a person as Scolly. But soon she learned that he had gone to Rhododendron on his way from Boston to Stonecliff, and that he had already seen Miss Linthicomb. If she had given tongue to what was in her mind, when she was informed of this, she would have expressed much regret. She would have said that she had supposed that her boy would not so quickly forget his disappointment. But though, with a sigh, she resorted to the good old-fashioned refuge that all men are alike, she stoutly refused to go with John to Rhododendron. His own cheerfulness at home was almost more than she could bear, and she knew that she could not treat Miss Linthicomb or Scolly as kindly as she desired to treat every member of the human race. John still maintained a discreet silence about Mrs. Randolph, and mentioned her and her husband only incidentally.

One day, before the relations between John and Scolly and Agnes had been strained, the four visitors at Rhododendron were driving around the cape, and John met them as they were coming into Stonecliff. As he was irrationally eager that his mother and Mrs. Randolph should see each other he prevailed upon the party to go to his father's house. The

visit was very short, but John noticed with pleasure that Mrs. Randolph was much attracted by his mother. But he noticed also, — and this gave him a good deal of self-satisfied amusement, — that Mrs. Rantoul's eyes were almost constantly on Miss Linthcomb. The young girl seemed to have charmed her. Whether Agnes addressed her or wandered away with Scolly, — and she did this a good deal, for it was one of the red-letter days of these two lovers, — Mrs. Rantoul followed with a look of eager, almost frightened, questioning. John supposed that his mother was wondering how a young woman so eminently sensible could have rejected her son. But Mrs. Rantoul was not thinking of that at all. Her mind and her memory were occupied with a far different matter. John noticed that his mother's feelings had, for some reason, overcome her, and he was glad when Scolly intimated that it was time to be on the way to Rhododendron. When the visitors were out of sight Mrs. Rantoul looked after them abstractedly until John said : —

“Mother, you seem to be in a trance to-day.”

Mrs. Rantoul turned to her son on hearing these words, and he saw that she was suffering great anguish. Still, imagining that it was of him and of his supposed disappointment that she was thinking, he put his arms about her to comfort her, and to assure her that he had entirely recovered. But as soon as Mrs. Rantoul felt the strong support she laid her head upon John's shoulder and burst into

tears. For a long time she did not speak, and when her words could be heard, she simply said : —

“ O John ! Have you never seen it ? ”

“ Seen what, mother ? ”

“ The resemblance — how could it escape you, John ? ” And with these words Mrs. Rantoul, having become more composed, raised her head and looked at John, who stood staring at her in almost stupid wonderment.

“ I don’t know what resemblance you refer to, my dear mother. ”

“ Don’t you see, John, that Miss Linthicomb is the exact counterpart of your aunt ? ” As Mrs. Rantoul said this they were alarmed by a noise in the house as if something had fallen heavily. When John ran in, followed by his mother, he found his father struggling to his feet ; but when the old man saw his son enter the room, he raised his stout cane threateningly and stammered out, “ Keep your hands off me, young man ; ef you had enny sense o’ delicacy about ye, ye wouldn’t be about a house where you wasn’t wanted. ” With this, and by a decisive effort, he got on his feet, and shuffled out of the room, muttering to himself maledictions on a dark room so full of furniture that a man couldn’t make his way about in it “ without stumblin’ over somethin’. ”

But when he reached the lighted hall and encountered his wife he cowered before her like a whipped hound, and he made his way to his own apartment with his head down.

"Father is growing weaker, isn't he?" said John, after a pause.

"I am afraid he is." Mrs. Rantoul had been thinking of the meaning of that sudden fall; she was sure that the doctor had overheard what she said to John, and perhaps he had seen Agnes Linthcomb. In Mrs. Rantoul's mind there was no doubt that she had seen and talked with Mary Pickering, and yet she recognized the important fact that she had no rational basis for her belief. But as she was moving away, John, arousing himself from his tumultuous reflections, said, "Come back, mother; I've something to say to you."

"Some other time, John; I must go now."

"No, now, mother; I want you now."

There was something in John's manner which convinced Mrs. Rantoul that John's communication had a bearing on what was in her mind, so she returned to the room in which the doctor had fallen.

"Mother," began John suddenly, "do you think that Agnes Linthcomb is Mary Pickering?"

Mrs. Rantoul wondered how far she ought to permit her suspicions, which had really nothing but what she called her intuitions for a basis, to be known to her son, when John, who saw that she was hesitating about taking him into her confidence, went on, "I don't know how much you know about it; do you really know whether Mary Pickering is alive or dead?"

"I had almost believed her dead, John."

"What do you know?"

"Nothing."

"What do you think?"

"I think that she's alive."

John took his mother's hand in his and felt that it was trembling, and yet her face was very calm, and showed the fine courage something of which he had seen when she had combated the doctor's purpose to compel him to study medicine. At last he said, "What do you intend to do, mother?"

"I haven't made up my mind, dear."

"Don't you want any aid?"

"No, John; you can't help me in this; there is no sympathy between you and the doctor, and I must work alone. But, if you have any knowledge, I should like the help of that."

Then John told her the story which he had heard at Captain Symonds's house, and the interview with his father. When he ended his mother simply said, "Thank you, my dear; now I've the advantage of knowing that I'm right."

"And is Agnes Linthicomb Mary Pickering?"

"I think so."

"You have no other proof than the resemblance?"

"No; but why don't you find out, John? I think you can." Mrs. Rantoul's calmness was marvellous to her son. He had recognized the courage with which she did battle for him when he chose to become an artist, contrary to his father's wishes and designs, but now she stood in the presence of what

promised to be a family tragedy, prepared for the worst, and resolute in her intention to discover the full proportions of the moral ugliness which fronted her.

"Do you mean through this stranger?"

"Certainly; he must be approachable. Some one must know who he is, and"—There was an instant's brightening of Mrs. Rantoul's face as she went on more quickly, "There can be no doubt that he is in some way connected with the people in North Carolina with whom Mary was left. Perhaps—but that's not likely—at any rate he must have lived there. Persons and Basswood have received what information they have from that man. Find out who he is, John."

"I will do what I can, mother."

"You must find out."

John thought at once of Ballard and Captain Symonds, but before starting to find them, he said to his mother:—

"Basswood and Persons do not come here as often as they did a few weeks ago?"

"No; but their visits always make your father worse."

When John had gone Mrs. Rantoul went to see the doctor, and the condition in which she found him greatly alarmed her. When she entered the room he was seated in his large arm-chair, his hands clasped on the top of his cane, his head leaning forward. His eyes were closed, and, as he opened them to see who had come in, they shrank before her

gaze. There had been a quick development of something in his physical condition, for the lines in the face had grown deeper, and the corners of the mouth, which was half open, were drawn downward. Mrs. Rantoul saw that it would be cruel to tell her husband what was in her mind, and that he suffered from her presence. Therefore she went away ; but she sent for a nurse and a physician, to learn from the latter that the final blow might fall upon the last Doctor Rantoul at almost any moment. She realized then that John and she must make restitution for the doctor's crime, and she was thankful to be able to lift a weight of sin from her son's name. She had not felt any love for the doctor for these many years ; but she had pride and a strong attachment to the memory of a young affection which had once made life very blissful.

In the mean time, John made his way to the village store and found Ballard, telling him that he wanted him to go to Captain Symonds. The fisherman was discovered on the beach. "Any luck, captain?" asked Ballard.

The captain made no reply to this question, but turned to John : —

"Wall, John, how be ye? haint seen ye for more'n an age. You'n Sim beant goin' out, be ye?"

"I want to talk with both of you," said John. "I want to discover something more about Mary Pickering, and I think there's a way."

His auditors betrayed some interest, and John

went on : " You've seen a fellow about with Persons, Ballard, haven't you ? "

" The fellow with a soft white hat ; seedy-like ? "

" Yes ; I believe that man knows something about Mary. Ballard, can you find out who he is ? "

" I know who he is ; leastways I know what he calls himself, and where he says he's from. "

" Well ! "

" He says his name's Sanders, and that he's from Texas. "

" I don't believe he's from Texas, " said John.

" Why not ? " asked Captain Symonds.

" Because I think he's from North Carolina. Do you know him, Ballard ? "

" Well, I know him well enough to pass the time of day with him. "

" Suppose you try to find out whether he knows any one of the name of Strand in North Carolina. You can do it. At any rate Captain Symonds can give you an idea of how to go to work. "

This rather crude suggestion of John's did not strike the captain favorably, while Ballard concealed his utter lack of capacity to form a plan by saying : —

" I understand, John. You just want to find out who that man is. You leave it to me and the captain. We'll fix up something. "

He said this with such an air of assurance that John was convinced that Ballard had already conceived some cunning scheme for extorting information from the unknown stranger.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ALL-DEVOURING TIDE.

SINCE Scolly's attempt to show him the baseness of his conduct the atmosphere of Rhododendron had changed for John. Mrs. Randolph was kinder than she had ever been before. There had come into her attitude towards him a certain something by which he recognized that her friendship had grown since the sail which Agnes Linthicomb had made unpleasant. When they were alone together she was in bounding spirits, and her happiness was so great that it overflowed into the lives of most of those who were near to her. Mr. Randolph congratulated himself on the success of his plan for finding rest for his wife; but Scolly and Agnes were oppressed with fears. They talked over Mrs. Randolph and John more than once, and came to the conclusion that they would be suffering participants in a scandal if something were not done. What the "something" was, or how it was to be done, were indefinite, and yet when Scolly pronounced the decision that "something must be done," in his sternest and most judicial tones, Agnes felt a just pride in his capacity for performance, while he felt that an important end had been really accomplished. But still the inti-

macy went on. Mr. Randolph said nothing more, although he had occasional pangs of jealousy when he saw that his wife enjoyed John Rantoul's society much more than she had ever enjoyed her husband's. As for Mrs. Randolph herself she had no thought of wounding her husband, and she only occasionally suspected what might be her true feeling for John Rantoul. It must be confessed that the world would have called her wilfully blind, but then she started out with the hypothesis that the world was unable to comprehend either her or the man whose genius she was making available.

As Scolly and Agnes continued to exhibit a cold disapproval of them Mrs. Randolph and John were now oftener alone than they had been before. One pleasant afternoon they took a long walk through the woods back of the hotel, until they finally came to a great cleft in the red cliff. They were in a pine grove, and the air was laden with the sweet scent of the trees, and the earth was carpeted thick with the slippery brown needles. Pointing to a niche in the wall of the chasm, just below them, John said : —

"Do you think you have enough courage to sit there?"

"I don't know," she responded idly, "do you want me to sit there?"

"Not by any means."

"I don't see any danger, provided one can get there. That seems difficult."

"Oh, no, it isn't; there's a not very steep path

running directly to it ;” and he held her hand while she leaned over the edge of the precipice.

“Yes, I see the path. Suppose I go down !” she said.

“I think not.” John spoke decisively.

“Is it dangerous? I don’t see why you tempted me if I ought not to yield.”

“Yes, it’s very dangerous ; although the seat is at least twenty feet above the water a tidal wave rushed in there only a few years ago and drowned a young girl who was sitting in that very niche. But you do not always yield to temptations,” he added.

“No?” she said. “How do you know?”

“I know it because I have learned it by experience.”

“I did not know that your experience had been so extensive.”

“It isn’t so much a question of extensive as of thorough experience.”

“You really do not know me nearly so well as you think you do.” She spoke gayly and with a mocking light in her eyes ; and, as she went on, she seemed to John to be drifting from him. “Do you know, I fancy that you really don’t understand yourself very well?”

“Perhaps I don’t,” he responded. But do you think you are so hard to understand?”

“Oh, yes, I’m a great puzzle. I find myself wondering over my own inconsequences sometimes. I often do the very things I have always before determined that I would never do.”

"For example?"

"If I should give you an example you would know one of my secrets ; no, I shall not do that. But you look very solemn ; what are you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm wondering how any one can understand you, if you don't." John had flattered himself that he comprehended Mrs. Randolph, because, although there was much depth, there was also much steadiness, so that, knowing the direction of her feelings, he supposed that he could foretell what would happen under given circumstances.

"No one understands me thoroughly, I fancy," she replied ; "but then you ought not to try to compel a woman to obey laws, and, if we don't obey laws, how are you to reason about our conduct?"

"I suppose you can't, if that's the truth, but I fancied you very loyal to the logic of events, and that you always did what you ought."

"No, I do not do what the world thinks I ought." Presently she was attracted by a small boat anchored well out in the harbor. Pointing to it, she said : —

"That's the kind of existence which is the best, isn't it?"

"What kind?"

"Why, the little boat kind, the kind that stays inside the bar, and never gets tossed about by waves. I suppose the people in that boat never feel any greater tumult than when they catch a little bigger fish than usual."

"You don't suppose you'd like that, do you?"

"Suppose," she cried in a rapturous way, as if her whole being were lighted up with joy at the contemplation of an ideal life; "suppose! Why I should be enchanted with it. Think of an existence in which you are never despondent, never unhappy, never called upon to put yourself out for other people's satisfaction."

"How tired you would be at the end of the first day!"

"Indeed, I would not. I should catch my fish, eat them, sleep, and be comfortable. Comfort is what I want."

"You have often told me that." John had the hopeless feeling of one who sees happiness departing, and he began to experience an almost uncontrollable desire to do something to recall it, to say something that might bring Mrs. Randolph back to her usual mood, which was not so elusive as this in which she seemed to be to-day. He did not like her bantering tone, and he almost felt that she was attempting to escape from the meshes of her friendship. To even suspect this was painful, and as it was his nature to permit a doubt to go to its bitterest end, he was soon wondering if Mrs. Randolph had grown tired of his devotion. Before he could go on she spoke again cheerily and as though she were in harmony with the beautiful scene before her, and with the fine air which seemed to enlarge her vitality with every breath that she drew.

"How lovely this is!" she said. She was look-

ing under the dark pine branches out to the waters. The contrast of color was exquisite. Under the trees where they sat the dark brown shadows and the gray black trunks were relieved by the bright greens of the bushes whose seed had been kindly planted by wandering birds. Then came the red rocks, touched here and there by patches of gray lichen, then the deep blue water of the harbor, and, beyond, a long point of land, covered with tender green grass, and stately elms; at its foot strong granite boulders, and on its top a white tower-like light-house. Still farther on broke the white surf of the Atlantic. The sea and the air were still, gulls flew high up among the banks of snowy clouds that hung almost motionless. The fishing schooners made their lazy way out of the harbor, until well beyond the point they caught a freshening breeze, and spreading their wings, sailed swiftly off towards the far horizon. The insects made the only sounds.

John did not see the beauty about him, nor did he hear what Mrs. Randolph said, although he was conscious that the tones of her voice betrayed utter indifference to anything save the emotion or pleasure of the moment. In a few days she would go away from Rhododendron, and perhaps he should never see her again; and yet her high spirits, her cheerful talk, her light laughter, all indicated to him that she cared no more for the leave-taking than if he had been the most ordinary acquaintance.

It was apparent that he was not necessary to her life as she was to his. She would be happy with her husband and in her home in Washington, while he must live on alone with a haunting memory of her loveliness, and a passionate longing for her friendship and her presence. He wondered if he could be happy in her absence; he speculated as to what would be the outcome of the future with Mrs. Randolph left out of it. His forebodings became gloomier and gloomier. The thought that, after all, her lack of sympathy with his emotions was natural and proper came to him with great force. He confessed to himself very sadly, that he had no right to be nearer her than he seemed to be at this very unpleasant moment. But why could she not be more subdued in the presence of his misery? Did she realize what the coming separation meant? He looked at her and saw that she had not heeded his silence.

She too was thinking of the future, but with a surer vision than his. She was hoping for the fruition of her ambition. She saw her friendship for John bringing results which would make him famous, and satisfy her that her life had not been lived in vain. She knew that she had strengthened a worthy purpose, and she had no doubt that the comradeship of these few happy summer weeks had made a lasting and a good impression. Although she desired to see something tangible, some result, she was certain that, in good time, the result would

come, and that she would enjoy the triumph of his achievement. When she said that the quiet boat was a symbol of her idea of a happy life, she believed it, because she was just then in perfect repose. Anything that her eye rested on would have been symbolical to her of contented existence. A chord — nay, a single note — came to represent to her the harmony which was expressing the deep meaning of her soul's satisfaction. In some vague way she felt that John alone was out of tune, and she could not understand the reason. She had not thought of the pain which parting would bring; that seemed a pin's point too insignificant to recognize; she was busy with the beauty of a relationship which had done so much for both, and that with perfect purity.

But John knew that he loved Mrs. Randolph, and he could not content himself with bright dreams of a glorious future; the future without her seemed to him very dark and forbidding. Life had nothing in it. As he was permitting his sadness to suggest the whole train of evils which would come upon him he resolved to make one more attempt to bring Mrs. Randolph to a graver and, therefore, to a more congenial mood. He had an irresistible desire to hear once more an expression of her sympathy with him. As he looked at her, her profile was towards him, and she did not see his eager, questioning face, as he said, "Do you realize how soon you and I must separate, perhaps forever?"

A shade of pain came over Mrs. Randolph's face, and her eyes dropped, as she answered without looking at him, "I know well enough that I am going away from here in three days."

"Are you glad to go?"

"I should be much better pleased on going if I could believe that my coming here has done any good."

"But it has done good." John spoke fervently. The words and the voice gave him hope.

"But I have heard that many, many times, and yet I have seen no evidence of it, — that is, no evidence that you are really working out something."

"Is there no change in me since you first knew me?"

This question brought a sudden flow of memory that swept over Mrs. Randolph's face in advancing and receding waves of color. What change had not her acquaintance with John made, both in him and in her? When she answered it was timidly almost, and with a sidelong look which brought much consolation and comfort to John.

"Yes," she said, "I have seen a great change in you, a change for the better."

"Is not that, then, evidence enough for you?" The hope, the joy, the sweetness of life, which, a short time before, he had seen receding, and towards which he had reached out with a cry of anguish in his heart, were coming back to him.

"It has been evidence enough; but now I want

more," and somehow, with these words, the kind eyes gave out a kindlier light.

"What is it that you want?" There was eagerness in his voice, and enthusiasm in his eyes. His soul was aglow with his infatuation. He was willing to be reckless in his promises, perhaps in his deeds.

"I want to know what you are going to paint for me."

"Paint for you?" As he said this John rose and walked in front of Mrs. Randolph. She looked up at him, and some impulse made him take both her hands, and she stood before him. In a moment he had forgotten all his resolutions and all his promises. His world contained only one thing — this woman; he saw nothing else, recalled nothing else. His voice forsook him, so great was the mastery of his passion; and as the cruel September tide of ocean had once, on that very spot, clutched at human life, and dragged it powerless to its grave, so his sweeping love rose within him, drowned all other feeling, and dragged his purpose from its throne.

"Paint for you!" Ah, the richness of that strong voice then! Mrs. Randolph remembered it long afterwards; heard it in the night when she lay sleepless, thinking of the opportunities that are lost for the not knowing them in time.

"Paint for you! I'd paint my soul for you if I could. I'd do more, I'd paint your soul into my canvases, and make them more beautiful than any

on which the world has ever looked. Paint for you ! All that I shall ever do will be for you, for you have given me all my power, you have awakened all my genius, you have kindled all my enthusiasm, for I love you — love you as I never before dreamed of loving.”

After he said this the enthusiasm and the glow gave way to a look of hopelessness, and slowly dropping Mrs. Randolph's hands, he turned from her and hid his face. There was silence for a time, and when John turned round his face was still hopeless. But as he saw the kind eyes of Mrs. Randolph again, there was a look of eagerness, as he said, with almost childlike simplicity, “Do not tell me that I can never see you again !”

“I have not told you that.” Her voice was calm, but her eyes were happy.

“And you will not?”

“I do not know ; I ought to.”

“But do not !” There was almost a boyish sob in the pleading.

“We must not talk about it any more now,” she answered ; “we must go home.”

They walked back to the hotel without speaking to each other, John the victim of tormenting doubts, and Mrs. Randolph wondering if she could forgive the declaration of his love.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOVE BEGINS TO WIN ITS VICTORY.

JOHN said good-by to Mrs. Randolph at the door of the hotel, and then went directly away. He saw Agnes and Scolly, but he did not want to speak to them; and, especially, he did not want them to speak to him. The two lovers noticed the hurry of his departure, but how they construed it, or whether they put any construction on it at all, they did not tell each other. After a while Scolly said:—

“I wonder when this thing will end.”

“I’m sure I wish we were going to-morrow.”

There had come a change over John in his attitude towards Miss Linthicomb, and the young woman had noticed it. Loving Scolly as she did, her own sympathetic nature had taken on a harder shell of dutifulness. She had, indeed, been always dutiful; but not with the uncompromising sternness which she now manifested. Hitherto her judgments had been tempered with gentleness, but the frowns of her lover seemed to have soured the milk of human kindness in her bosom, and she rarely smiled, now, in John’s presence, and her coldness towards Mrs. Randolph, considering the old relations of the two, was something phenomenal. Scolly had convinced

her that she must show Mrs. Randolph and John her utter disapproval of their dangerous and scandalous intimacy, and she had therefore done her utmost to administer with significant silences that chiding to which the guilty man and foolish woman had refused to listen.

It therefore somewhat wounded her *amour propre* to discover, soon after the short visit to Mrs. Rantoul, at Stonecliff, not only that the friendship of John and Mrs. Randolph continued, apparently growing stronger ; but that Rantoul's treatment of her had changed, and that not in a way which indicated regret that he had wounded her, or contrition for his misconduct. He showed an affection for her, and manifested a deference which she could not understand. It seemed as though he were telling her in this silent way that he knew her thoughts, but that he must regretfully continue to do as he had told her that he would. Agnes was waging a hard struggle with herself. She had no doubt about the righteousness of her condemnation, because Scolly told her it was right ; but, at the same time, her affection for John still existed, and she would have been very glad to go to him offering a sympathy which she had been told would be very sinful.

On his part, John was acting on the assumption that Agnes was none other than the wronged and defrauded Mary Pickering. As a child he had a brother's love for his cousin, and now there was added the sense that he was enjoying the fruits of the

robbery of her name and fortune, and of the dismal, bitter, years of childhood which she had passed in darkness and poverty. He had received no report from Ballard or the captain, and he did not mean to give a sign of the truth until he was possessed of the information which he was seeking. Nevertheless, he had not been doubtful from the time when his mother told him of her conviction. He believed that Agnes Linthicomb was Mary Pickering as firmly as if she had never been taken away from Stonecliff, but had remained, through all these years, a sister in his father's house. Therefore, the wrong that had been done her by the doctor was constantly in his mind, and the thought unconsciously governed his relations with her.

"I can't make John Rantoul out," Miss Linthicomb continued, after a moment's pause.

"I'm very glad you can't," said Scolly; "if you could understand such a specimen of human nature I should begin to have doubts of you."

"I don't mean generally, but I can't make out the change that has come over him recently."

"What change? I don't see any, except an increase of moroseness."

"I really don't understand why you should call his coldness towards us morose. I don't think you can blame him for not wanting to talk to people who so thoroughly disapprove of him as you and I do."

"Well, he has the remedy in his own hands."

"I know all that ; but haven't you noticed the change in his manner to me?"

"No ; except as I've said. He is ugly and defiant. He flaunts his relations with Mrs. Randolph in our faces, and she permits his attentions, although she knows they are approaching the edge of a scandal. I'm convinced now that she's either in love with him or else she's flirting with him, and I don't know which is the worst."

Miss Linthicomb betrayed a variety of feelings while this speech was in progress. At first it was evident that she was provoked, but she finally spoke sorrowfully, saying, "Robert, if I were to tell you what I think of your judgment of John Rantoul, — yes, of both our judgments, — you would be very angry ; and I don't want you to be, because I know that you are honest in your opinions, and that you are doing what you think is for the best."

"I am doing what I know is for the best. I hope, Agnes, that you are not acquiring a soft side for the sinner in this case."

"You don't believe in hating the sin and loving the sinner, then?"

"I believe that is all rot — begging your pardon. The people who love the sinner generally have a partiality for the sin ; at least, they'd like to have the courage to commit it."

Miss Linthicomb tossed her head slightly, and her voice had a rather defiant ring as she said, "Well, I like John Rantoul very much, whether he's a sinner

or not. There's something about him that draws me to him, and I can't help it. I'm sorry if you think I would do as he is doing if I had the courage ; but I can't help that either."

Saying this Miss Linthicomb went hastily into the house. She had stood the strain of the conflict as long as she was able to, and now her emotions got the better of her obedience and her loyalty to her lover, and she said what had long been in her heart.

Scolly, left alone, was wounded and a little angry. He was incapable of understanding a state of mind that could permit the retention of affection for so wilful and persistent a violator of social morality as John. He even wondered for a moment if he might not have been grievously mistaken in Miss Linthicomb, and whether he ought to introduce a person with such lax likings into his respectable family, — a family that had not had an illegal or untraditional heart-beat for at least four generations. Thinking of his promised wife, in connection with Mrs. Randolph, he concluded that all Southern women must be more or less unprincipled in matters of the heart. Still he was obliged to admit that Agnes had shown herself very tractable, and willing to learn the Scolly code of non-emotional morality ; and he therefore concluded that in the end everything would come out right. The fact that he could be content with so indefinite a conclusion showed that his heart had been deeply touched, and that he was very much in love.

When John declared his love for her Marion Randolph recognized that not only what she had feared had happened, but that that was true which she had refused to suspect. A year before the suggestion of love from any man but her husband would have ended the offender's acquaintance with her, but now she had listened to John's confession with a thrill of pleasure, and it had required some effort of the will to abstain from showing him that she returned his love. Long ago, when she first fully recognized that John loved her, and she determined that, notwithstanding he might retain her friendship, she also made up her mind as to the course she would pursue if he ever overstepped what she then marked out as the bounds of propriety, and gave tongue to his passion. She convinced herself, it is true, that she could prevent the happening of such a catastrophe, but she had much forethought, and liked always to be prepared for all contingencies, possible as well as probable. Therefore she had imagined that if John should ever so far forget himself as to tell her of his love she would dismiss him forever, no matter what the pain might be to her.

Now, however, that the event, then dimly foreseen, had actually occurred, she could not bring herself to carry out her determination. Having once made the resolution it naturally came to her as soon as she heard John's outburst of passion, but she could not banish him while her own heart was beat-

ing in ecstatic response to his burning words ; nor, again, could she be so cruel as to refuse his pleading request that he might see her again.

Therefore when he said to her, as she entered the hotel, " May I see you to-morrow ? " she answered, " Yes ; " adding, after a pause, during which she had reflected that the situation was not exactly clear, " I want to see you and talk with you ; yes, come to-morrow. "

When she was alone she sat for many minutes, dazed. She tried to look at the world, at herself, her husband, her relations with John from her own point of view, but she could not. Everything seemed to have shifted. Virtue and vice seemed to come perilously near to each other, and to sometimes quite coalesce and become one. Her mind went on repeating the story of the true proportions of relations and events as she had known them only twelve months before, but the fact that all these proportions had undergone a change made no impression on her moral sense. That John Rantoul loved her did not shock her. She had long since ceased to rebel against that, and had even come to accept it as a pleasant feature of her life. She now found herself unable to condemn her lover for declaring his passion. She repeated to herself over and over again that John had been guilty of an enormous offence ; that he had not kept faith with her ; that he had done what he had often promised that he would never do ; and what she had again and again insisted

that he should restrain himself from doing ; still all her mental repetition of the truth did not change her feeling. She pardoned everything, and when she came to question herself of the future she found it impossible to determine that their next interview must be the last.

There was a delicious languor through all her being. In the midst of her questioning she would find herself wrapped in pleasant dreams and memories ; and especially would her mind revert to the glowing face of her lover as he stood before her and poured out the story of his great passion. Then, as she tried to make her duty paramount, and summoned her strong will to her aid, she discovered that her heart had gained the mastery, and, crying out, "I love him ; I love him," she burst into a flood of tears. She did not leave her room that night, and when she appeared in the breakfast-room the next morning she was so pale that Agnes Linthicomb again annoyed Scolly by openly renewing a caressing friendship which had been suspended since the day when Mrs. Randolph refused to permit Agnes to talk about John and his love.

When John came back to Rhododendron it was evident that he also had passed a sleepless night. But he had not regretted for a single minute of the wakeful hours that he loved Mrs. Randolph, or that he had made confession of his love. He knew from the kind expression of her eyes, and from the tones of her voice, that he had not lost her friendship, and

that he would probably never lose it now. He enjoyed his love more than he had for a long time, and he went back to Mrs. Randolph nearly as blissful as an accepted lover. He wondered a little as to what decision the morning would bring, and to hear this, and to reassure himself of Mrs. Randolph's friendship was now the principal business of life. On his way home the evening before Ballard had met him and told him that he thought he would have some information for him the next morning; but, as important as John deemed this, he told Ballard that he could not see him until the evening. He deliberately determined that he would not listen to anything which might interfere with his promised visit to Rhododendron.

There was nothing for John to fear from Mrs. Randolph. For the first time in her life she had been unable to come to any conclusion. She was simply drifting, having reached only one fixed point in her reflections, which was, that she would never permit John to see that she loved him; but, as she had weakly led him on to his fate, and as she held herself now responsible for his future, at least so far as seeing to it that no disaster should come from the sudden withdrawal of a friendship which she had so generously and so unfortunately conferred upon him, she would continue their comradeship for the two days during which she was to remain in Rhododendron, and would grant him what comfort he might be able to obtain during their separation, which might

turn out to be lasting, from the knowledge that her sympathy would be always his.

There was a good deal of constraint in the first few moments after their greeting. There had come a new relationship between them, and, while the man did not know what might be the feeling or intention of the woman, she was conscious of the necessity of concealment. They were happy, nevertheless, in this companionship, and found themselves talking merrily what might have seemed commonplaces to ordinary and uninformed observers, although there was meaning enough to the two who knew. At length John said :—

“ I have a subject for my picture.”

If he had been a skilful diviner of the feminine heart he would have seen Mrs. Randolph's secret as soon as he uttered this sentence. Perhaps he would have uttered it for the purpose of watching its effect on her. At any rate the effect was visible, for the color came into her cheeks, and her eyes shone with pleasure, as she responded, with so much simple, heartfelt, unaffected joy, “ Oh, I'm so glad ! Tell me what it is—quick—don't keep me in suspense a minute,” that John was surprised and delighted.

“ I am going to paint my story.”

Mrs. Randolph became quietly expectant. She knew that this love-story of which she was so great a part was about to be illustrated, and she doubted whether it could be done.

"How do you mean to do it?" she said.

Then John told her that late the night before, while he lay wakeful, unable to sleep for the tumult of his thoughts, unable to lie still for the restless energy with which the event of the day had filled his body, the thought of some lines which he had read earlier in the day came to him.

"What are the lines?" she asked.

"I am really afraid to tell you," he answered, "for it seems to me that one who does not feel as I do,—who is not completely wrapped in one's love,—who does not idealize one's own nature by reason of a passion which is great and beautiful,—that such a one cannot help but think the application of these lines to myself, boastful and egotistical."

Mrs. Randolph hesitated a moment before she answered, and when she spoke it was in a low voice that would again have betrayed her if John had not been blind to all signs of love, if he could have dreamed that her heart might at that moment be beating in happy unison with his own.

"I do not believe I shall find the application of the lines to your story egotistical or boastful," she said.

"I hope you will not. If I thought you had such a belief about me, it would pain me past all cure."

"What are the lines?"

Then he repeated to her these lines from Thalassius:—

“ And in the soul within the sense began,
The manlike passion of a godlike man;
And in the sense within the soul again,
Thoughts that make men of gods, and gods of men.”

“ They are very beautiful ! ” was all the comment she made for a long time, and then added, “ and wonderfully appropriate.”

“ Do you really think them appropriate ? ” He asked this question eagerly, and his hand moved forward, involuntarily, to grasp hers ; but he recollected himself, and did not touch the beautiful white fingers that seemed for a moment to invite his kisses.

“ Yes.”

“ Why ? — but I’ll not ask that ; it isn’t fair. I’ll tell you how I shall illustrate the lines ; ” and he told her that he would paint a youth turning his back on the material life which he had always led, inspired by a beautiful woman to devote himself to the cultivation of the richer and more poetic side of his nature. How he should paint this picture he did not know, but he had the *motif*, and he had the subject in himself.

Mrs. Randolph listened to him with great interest, and when he had finished she said, “ It will be beautiful, if you do it worthily.”

When he went away that evening it was understood that he should come the next afternoon to say his last good-by.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE END OF THE CONSPIRACY.

JOHN RANTOUL drove away from Rhododendron in a state of great uncertainty. The declaration of his love brought relief to him, and yet he fully realized that it endangered his standing with Mrs. Randolph. He persisted in refusing to see what almost any other man would have recognized — that the woman was in love with him. As he drove on, unconscious of anything save his own thoughts, he was sometimes glad that his confession had been forced from him, and, again, he was filled with fear lest he had put an end to the friendship that had been so dear. The day when he could have felt remorse for his love had long since passed.

The sun was setting behind the hills on the west shore of the harbor, and, as he caught a glimpse of the golden glory through the interlacing trees he hurried on to the top of a hill whence he could look over the waters and out to sea. Nature and he were just then in congenial mood. Directly in front of him the sky was rich with color, — a wall of shining splendor, the yellow, bold and beautiful, stretched out in a great band of light that rested on a strong red base, and in between the patches of

cloud which caught and held the color, the sky was a delicate pale-green. The man who looked at all this beauty expanded under its influence until his soul seemed to be too great for its encasement. He wished that he might fly; that he might bask forever in the glorious love which the burning sky and cloud before him typified; that all the grosser senses and the body might exhale themselves into the pure essence of his passion. The rapture filled his heart almost to breaking it, and at last he was overcome by the strength of his own emotions, and a thought of the future, with its promise of ill, intruded upon his happiness. As he sat thinking of the blackness of his fate he chanced to look down the harbor, and again nature seemed to offer him a picture of his life.

A mist, rising from the water, blurred the outlines of the shores and of the vessels riding at anchor. It was a gray mist, and it took the color from everything that came within its influence. The green foliage became black under its uncanny touch, the sobbing water lost the dolphin hues with which the setting sun painted the waves immediately beneath the golden clouds, and was a dead slate color. It was all gray and lifeless. There was no promise in it. "Ah!" sighed John, "how like it is! That is what my life must be because I did not know her soon enough." And then he thought how worthy and how rich that life might be if Marion Randolph were his wife. But she could never be any more to

him than she had been, — probably not so much. She was about to go away, and to meet again would not be well for either. For either ! The bare suggestion of the thought that she might be in danger gave him pleasure. Unconsciously he had always desired Mrs. Randolph's love, and now he recognized his longing, and he was not angry with himself. If she had come then to him he would have defied the world and turned his back on fame ; he would have fled with her without thought of consequences, certain that she and he would be sufficient for each other, no matter what the world might do. There would have been need of all her woman's courage to avoid a great catastrophe. He did not consider this ; their relations to others did not once occur to him ; he did not think of Mr. Randolph, or his mother, or the hundred tongues that would give expression to the gleeful disapproval which society visits upon its unfortunate and offending members. John did not formulate any feeling except that which the gray mist pictured. The ecstasy of the golden light from the setting sun was wholly emotional, and so was the peacefulness which had hope — the blind hope that came out of the bottom of Pandora's box — for its foundation. John looked once more at the red and yellow sky before him, and again his love reigned triumphant, and again he looked seaward, but this time his glance went beyond the low gray mist rising from the water, far out to sea. Way up in the sky some clouds were slowly drifting. They

were blushing red with the reflection of the golden glory of the sunset in the harbor.

John drove up the Main street of Stonecliff very slowly. He saw no one, heard no sound, nor was he thinking; he was only feeling. Before he had gone half way through the village he became suddenly conscious of hearing some one calling his name, and the person, whoever it was, was obliged to call out several times before the preoccupied dreamer in the wagon raised his head and looked about him. When he realized, at last, that it was his own name which was being called so loudly, he discovered Simeon Ballard running to him from a neighboring physician's house. There was fright in the cripple's face, and it was several seconds before his panting excitement permitted him to speak. Ballard's unusual agitation was communicated to John, who began to experience a vague sense of alarm.

"What is the matter, Sim?" he asked. But the cripple could only stand and catch his breath. His fruitless efforts to articulate were so prolonged, that John began to fear that he would have to seek elsewhere for his information, when Ballard stammered, "Your father" —

"What of him; speak, man, let me know what has happened."

"John, can you bear it? It's dreadful." Ballard peered anxiously into his friend's face, as if to read there the signs of courage of which he knew there was need.

"For heaven's sake, tell me what it is! Do you think I'm a coward?" And yet he did dread to hear Ballard's news; he shrank from it, fearing that it might be a revelation of shame that would be a blot upon his father's memory and his name forever.

The cripple still hesitated to speak, and to John's urging only responded that the doctor was in great trouble, following this indefinite statement with some advice that he hurry home, and with an exclamation about those "pesky lawyers;" which simply served to convince John that the disclosure of his father's treatment of Mary Pickering had been made, and that disgrace had come.

He was about to give up all effort to extract information from Ballard, and to hasten home, when Capt. Symonds, and the doctor in front of whose house John had been stopped, came out, and from the captain the young man learned what Ballard's sensitiveness and excitement did not permit him to tell.

Ballard had found out that morning who the slouching stranger was. He had seen Strand enter the office of Josiah Persons, and soon afterwards the lawyer and the Southerner had gone together to Basswood's. Ballard knew that his friend, the photographer, had an unused lumber-room which was divided from the room in which Basswood conducted his most private and secret affairs by a thin board partition, and he determined, if it were possible, that he would overhear the conversation of the three. It

was not difficult to gain admission to the lumber-room. It is true that Ballard was obliged to apply to the photographer for the key; and, in order to secure compliance with his somewhat extraordinary request, he had to give a reason for desiring to conceal himself in the room. The explanation was easily and naturally made, for Ballard told the photographer boldly, that he wanted to listen to the conversation of the three conspirators, in order that he might secure an "item" for the city paper with which he corresponded. The photographer was a kind man, besides, he was public-spirited, and very willingly loaned his lumber-room for the worthy purpose of adding to the interest of a newspaper.

What Ballard overheard the captain briefly told to John. Strand narrated to the two lawyers the incidents of his visit to Rhododendron, cunningly omitting mention of his encounter with Scolly, and of the rudeness of that hasty young man, and representing his interview with Agnes to have been of the most friendly and agreeable character. The captain's story was the first that John heard of Strand's appearance at Rhododendron, and he was greatly surprised. To Mrs. Randolph the irruption of this stranger into her pleasant life had been a trivial incident not worthy of mention in view of the vastly more important matters which she and John had been busy with. John forgot for the moment that he had not seen much of Agnes recently, and he failed to recognize the fact that Strand was not so impor-

tant an object to the two women whom he followed through the wood, as he was to the man who suspected his identity, and therefore he wondered, as the captain continued his tale, why he had not heard of this strange visit, and he was troubled lest Strand should have told his secret to Miss Linthicomb. He had determined that the revelation should be made by his father, or, if he could not persuade the man who had done the wrong to make the reparation, that he himself would undertake the duty, cost him what it might.

According to Ballard, Basswood and Persons first laughed at Strand, and endeavoured to persuade him that nothing was to be made out of the doctor by the discovery that Agnes Linthicomb was Mary Pickering. They assured him that their plans for black-mailing the shrewd old man had fallen through ; that the doctor had carefully and completely concealed the means whereby he had possessed himself of Mary's property. But Strand's cupidity made him shrewd for once, and he met the lawyers at every step. He told them that it made very little difference to them whether Mary Pickering could or could not recover her property at law. The statute of limitations might indeed have run against both the crime and the right to the estate, although he could not see why, considering that the girl had been out of the State all these years ; but the point in the whole affair was that the doctor had made a false affidavit. Basswood and Persons scoffed at this, and the former asked Strand how he knew it, whereupon Strand replied : —

"I rec'n I aint so big a fool as you two take me for. I saw, gen'l'men, yes, sah, I saw as soon as I tole you that I had secured the information which I went to Texas for, that, in a word, sah, I had succeeded in my mission, that you had reckoned on depriving me of my share of the reward, sah; and I determined that I would not be circumvented by any of your Yankee designs, sah — no, sah, I would not. So I went to work, sah, and searched the record, and found the affidavit, which I knew was false."

"Well, suppose you have discovered all this, what are you going to do about it?" Persons asked.

"Sah, I'm going to show you how an honorable So'thern gen'l'man acts under such circumstances, sah. I'm going to give you an equal opportunity with myself to share in this man's ill-gotten wealth. That's what I'm going to do, sah. I tell you frankly, gen'l'men, that when I was talking with that handsome woman, and the days of our mutual companionship in childhood," — at this point, according to Ballard's testimony, Strand's voice perceptibly broke, — "yes, gen'l'men, the days of our childhood were recalled to me, I was greatly tempted to tell her the whole story and permit her to secure her property. But I saw her surrounded with all the luxuries that wealth can provide, gen'l'men, and I recollected that my honah, the honah of a Southern gen'l'man, was pledged to you."

Persons here broke in harshly, saying, "Oh,

come, don't give us any of that nonsense; tell us what you intend to do."

But Basswood was more conciliatory, and encouraged Strand to continue, telling Persons that he ought not to trample on their friend's finer feelings.

"Thank you, sah," continued Strand. "I have always appreciated very highly, I assure you, sah, the consideration you have shown me. I have no doubt, sah, I have never had any doubt that if this business had been left to you and me it would have been conducted as an affair between gen'l'men should be, sah."

Then Strand went on to say that if the two lawyers desired to stand by their bargain he was willing to carry out his part of the agreement, but that if they did not go at once with him to the doctor, and complete the business, he should go alone.

Basswood and Persons objected to this summary method of dealing with the old man, but Strand insisted, and the upshot of it was, the three started together for the doctor's house.

Ballard, alarmed and dazed by the importance of the revelations which he had heard, followed them at a safe distance out of the building. Now he understood why the doctor fainted in the post-office. His first thought was to warn John, but he had seen the young man drive off, that morning, in the direction of Rhododendron, and observation taught him that art, or some other entrancing companion-

ship, would keep his friend from Stonecliff all day. Therefore he hastened to Captain Symonds's house, and was lucky enough to find the old fisherman home. A consultation between the two resulted in the conclusion that nothing could be done until John's return; but, meanwhile, Ballard could not rest contented with inaction. He was anxious, and longed to defeat the conspiracy at once. He could not restrain his inclination to walk out to the doctor's house. As he approached, the three conspirators were standing on the piazza apparently in grave consultation, and, to his surprise, they motioned him to approach. He obeyed, half doubtingly and half fearfully, and was told by Basswood that the doctor had one of his "sick turns; and I shouldn't wonder," the lawyer continued, "if Mrs. Rantoul wouldn't be glad to have you do somethin' for her."

Mrs. Rantoul was, indeed, glad to see Ballard. She told him that the doctor had been again stricken with paralysis, and that she feared he was lying at death's door. She begged him to find John and to send her a physician.

John listened to this sad story, too profoundly moved to utter a word, and by the time it was finished — the captain rode with him as he told it — they reached his old home.

The physician was too late. Nothing, however, could have been done. The doctor lay dead. The hard, cruel, grasping, unlovely life was ended. His last dollar had been coined; his last crime com-

mitted ; his last bitter word spoken. Mrs. Rantoul wept, her head on John's shoulder, but there was no unspeakable grief in her heart ; her sorrow was for the severance of old, accustomed, ties, and for the unforgiven sin of the unrepentant man who had been her husband and the father of the boy who, for years, had received all the wonderful love which her rich and generous heart could give. Her boy stood, in the presence of the awful ending of his father's life, dry-eyed and horror-stricken. The suddenness of the revelation completely overpowered him. It was only after a few moments of silence, that, feeling the tender clinging of his sobbing mother, tears welled into his eyes, and he was able to take her from the room.

When they were alone she told him the story of the interview. She was not present at first, but, hearing the doctor speak in angry tones, she went near his door, not daring to enter the room, and heard the proofs of Mary Pickering's existence and of her identity told by Persons. When the young man, whom the doctor had once depended on to baffle Basswood, finished his story, his victim gave a gasp or two, as if struggling for a voice he could not command. Mrs. Rantoul rushed into the room only in time to see her husband fall heavily to the floor. When she reached him he was unconscious, but his eyes were open and stared at her, with the helpless, frightened, look all gone : he was beyond fear of the men whose knowledge of his guilty secret

had brought him to his end. He did not speak again, nor had she by word or sign recognized the presence of the three conspirators. They had skulked out of the house. Their prey had escaped them. Their labors and sneakings and baseness had come to nought, for, now that Mrs. Rantoul knew all, even Persons recognized that Mary Pickering would soon be in possession of her own.

And in the midst of this great trial John's first thought was of Mrs. Randolph. When Ballard ran out to him, calling his name, he was thinking of her, and not for a single instant had he ceased to judge all that had happened in its relation with his love of her. He determined to see her the next day, no matter how much the world might be scandalized. He would not, for an instant, be in a false position in her eyes. He would go to Rhododendron, as he intended, and he would tell his story to Marion Randolph, and he would let them all know that Agnes was Mary Pickering, his cousin, and the rightful owner of the property of which his father had possession for so many years. He did not expect to be able to conceal his father's crime; the baffled conspirators would make it impossible for him to do that.

So he went to Rhododendron on the following day. The villagers, seeing him drive by on his way to the watering-place, while "his own father was lyin' dead in the house," shook their heads over the

heartless and unfilial conduct of this wayward and worthless young man.

"What'll he do now, I wonder?" said an old gossip, for Persons had at once spread the story that Mary Pickering had been discovered, and that all the doctor's property belonged to her.

"I guess he'll starve," said another; "he's too proud to come on to the town."

John found Agnes Linthicomb alone, and he told her the story of his father's death and of her own life. She was full of sympathy for her newly found cousin; but still she could not conceal her pleasure on hearing definitely who she was. She wanted to go at once and tell Scolly that he was not to marry Agnes Linthicomb after all, but Mary Pickering; but John asked her to first find Marion Randolph, and to tell her that he wanted to see her alone.

To his surprise, Mary took both his hands and said, "John, for I can call you John now, can't I? You're my cousin, you know." And then she looked at him earnestly as if waiting for his consent, which he gave her by kissing her forehead.

"Do you know, John," she continued very gravely, and there was a suspicious drop shining in her eyes, "do you know that I'm so sorry for you? My dear cousin, I don't think you're wicked; I don't think you're bad; and I don't care what they say. I'll go and tell Marion that you want to see her."

She went away in great haste, and with her handkerchief to her eyes. While he was waiting for

Mrs. Randolph John realized what his cousin meant by her broken sentences and almost incoherent words. He recognized that, in the eyes of the world, he had committed the greatest of social crimes ; and he knew that Scolly had denounced him to his affianced wife.

But notwithstanding all this, and notwithstanding his dead father at home, his heart gave a leap of joy as Marion Randolph entered the room.

"You know what has happened?" he said.

"Yes, I know it, and I cannot tell you how much I feel for you."

As she told him of this new sympathy with him he reached out and took her hand. She did not withdraw it, but permitted it to remain in his. Then he cried out, "Marion, my love ! I could not stay away."

"I am very glad you did not," she answered.

"Are you glad? You will not turn away from me? You will — ah, do you know, that now I have nothing in the world but you and my mother ; and that your friendship is the dearest possession I have ever had?"

"Is it so much to you?" she asked.

"It is so much to me that life would be nothing without it."

"You shall always have my friendship — always." There was more emotion in her voice than John had ever heard before, and when she said this, she rose, and added, "We had better part now. What-

ever of light my friendship for you can pour into your darkened life shall be yours. Good-by."

John seized both her hands and covered them with passionate kisses.

"Good-by, my love ; good-by," he whispered.

"Good-by, my friend ; God bless you," she replied.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TRIUMPH OF THEIR LOVE.

THE business of transferring the property to Mary Pickering was not completed until after her marriage with Scolly in the fall. Naturally it was attended with difficulties, for Mary was unbusiness-like enough to insist that her cousin and aunt should retain at least half of the estate, which, under the shrewd management of the doctor, had become the best in the county. On the other hand, John, equally unpractical, insisted that Mary should take the whole. He did not want to soil his hands with a dollar of the money which had sent the last Doctor Rantoul to his grave in disgrace. His mother agreed with him. They two, the villagers said, were full of the foolish, unworldly, pride, which had characterized the Davises for two hundred years. Mrs. Rantoul was calmly happy in the realization of her dream. There was nothing now to separate her from her boy. She and he wanted to turn their backs on Stonecliff forever, and, above all, they did not want to carry with them any of the old curse.

But here Scolly came in with his exact notions, and insisted that the affair should be settled in a thoroughly business-like way. He was very rich,

and now that Mary was his wife she could afford to give away half or the whole of her property if she liked ; but her course must be determined after the transfer of the estate was properly attended to. He did not believe that then, or at any other time, would John Rantoul accept any of his cousin's money, and neither did he intend that his wife should receive a dollar which rightly belonged to John, through loose business methods. Scolly did not respect his old friend ; he never liked him thoroughly again. As Mrs. Randolph had gone away and there had been no public scandal, Scolly's active, angry, dislike and opposition gave place to a softer feeling that was akin to pity. The wedding had taken place at the Linthicomb family mansion in Virginia, and John had not gone to it. His father's recent death was a sufficient excuse for his absence. He sent his new-found cousin the miniature of her mother, and many who saw it wondered how, in the presence of such a likeness, Mary Pickering's identity could have been so long concealed. John's only opportunity for seeing Mrs. Randolph had thus come and gone, and they had not met. Scolly was satisfied. If, after this, a catastrophe happened, he and his wife would be at a safe distance, and could have no connection with it.

Scolly's disapproving dislike of John was met by the latter with a hearty disrelish of almost everything his former friend did. When Scolly suggested the services of accountants and other experts in the di-

vision of the doctor's estate John wanted to know if the business could not be settled without calling in strangers, upon which Scolly undertook to show him the difficulty of reaching a just conclusion and making an honest partition without an expert's knowledge. John begged that Mary might take the whole property, but Scolly, with much hauteur, declined the proffered gift.

"Well," said John, "go on and do the business in your own way. It's very brutal, I think, but I suppose it's natural. It all sounds like the commercial world."

"If you had a little of the sense of the commercial world," answered Scolly, "you'd be happier than you are, — and more prosperous."

"So far as my prosperity is concerned, Scolly, I'll take care of that; and, so far as my happiness is concerned, — well, that too is my own affair."

Scolly insisted that John should take part in the closing of the business, but that the obstinate young man would not do, and therefore the services of the law had to be invoked. When this unpleasant matter was settled, John and his mother quitted Stonecliff. The old life was finished. Its burdens were lifted off. Its sorrows and its littlenesses were no longer to trouble the two friends, who were thereafter to be always together. For Mrs. Rantoul there were the present and the future; for John there were his love, his mother, and his art.

Mrs. Rantoul, in those last days at Stonecliff, had

divined her son's secret. The knowledge that he loved Mrs. Randolph came to her when she discovered who Agnes Linthicomb was. She said nothing. She was deeply moved; but she understood that his love would not waste his life, but that it would beautify and ennoble it. She was forced to lay aside her pleasant hope that John might some day be completely happy, and she accepted with a sigh what she considered the hard fate of the last two of her family — her own and her boy's incomplete lives.

All through the winter that followed John worked at his picture. The little world that knew him in his genial, idle, days wondered at the change that had come over him. The men recalled, with regret and some surprise, that only two years before, he was a cheery, genial, companion, glad at any time to smoke and talk away a whole afternoon with any one who had as little to do; the women — well, they had never been able to see enough of him before, and now his indifference to them made him unbearable. His acquaintances of both sexes suspected that he was in love; but not one of them, except Mary and Scolly, ever knew his secret.

The artist painted with the enthusiasm of his great passion. Day after day he was in his studio, and not a day went by which did not see his masterpiece grow more beautiful. Nor was he unhappy, altogether. Perchance he would have been, were it not for the presence of his mother. Whenever

the studio was free from visitors or clients she sat there in a corner, by the open fireplace. With her New England birth and breeding she could not refrain from going through the form of sewing or knitting, but her eyes seldom wandered from her son, who was, every day, a new joy to her. She grieved over his unhappy fate, over his love that must be always unfruitful, but her heart was too full of gratitude for the privilege of being always with him to leave much room for regret. And he, seeing his mother happy, felt, for the first time, a wonderful peace in her presence. He sometimes longed for one kind glance from the beautiful eyes of the woman whom he loved — longed passionately to go to her, as a bound prisoner longs for freedom. But, at such times, the recollection of her gracious promise, made to him when they parted in the summer, brought repose and inspiration to him. He was no longer distraught or morbid; he was graver, more manly, more dignified; he was not so charming a companion for an idle moment, but he was a truer and worthier friend.

When the spring came, the picture was finished, and John was satisfied with it. He had put into it the power of his life. He knew that it was the best that he could do. If the world did not recognize his genius in that story of his own life, either it was blind or else he had not the true fire. His life was wrought into the painting, which was ready for the verdict. At first some of his friends among the

artists saw it. He was surprised at himself because of his calm assurance that they would pronounce his work to be good, and he was not disappointed. Above all he rejoiced in what they said of the picture of the woman. When the picture was exhibited to the public the critics were not, at first, friendly. They could not understand the meaning of the allegory; they could not fathom the depth of the story. They praised a painting by little Mr. Mince, who was John's neighbor, — a painting of a pretty child picking daisies. That they could appreciate; but they did not like to study to find the meaning of the illustration of the lines which John had taken for his *motif*, and some of them said that allegories were old-fashioned, and that great passions were untrue to the nature of the present, and belonged to the dim past, with its tales of magic and sorcery. But the great public went to see the picture, and liked it. Something in it appealed to their better natures. They liked the rapt look of love on the young man's face, and they stood almost in awe before the vision of the beautiful woman who was inspiring him with a splendid ambition which could not be satisfied with the material pursuits from which she was leading him. Men and women went away from John's picture with the feeling in their hearts that young men and maidens have when they close the old-fashioned pages that tell the story of ideal and heroic love. And, when the stronger men among the critics finally came to give their

opinions, they agreed with the public. The picture was a great triumph. Its painter was a great artist.

When his success was assured John wrote this letter to Mrs. Randolph:—

MY DEAR MRS. RANDOLPH,—

My work is finished. My love of you has borne its fruit. It may bear other fruit like this, but none that will be so good. Through the days and weeks and months of my hard separation from you the task which you inspired me to undertake has done much to lighten the darkness of my life. I have won a triumph because I love and worship you. If it were not for my passion for you, a passion which the world would call unholy, I would have died obscure and unworthy. It may be that the world is right, but I rejoice in my love, I would not surrender it, I would not replace its storms and troubles with the contentment of a placid existence, for it has raised me above my fellows, and has brought me very near to divinity. Will you not come and see the result which you have made possible?

Yours sincerely,

JOHN RANTOUL.

And Mrs. Randolph went. At first she went alone to see the picture, and as she looked at it, her heart was full of gladness that she had been the inspiration of so noble a creation. The gallery was crowded, and she witnessed the triumph of the man whose life was hers and to whom the richness of her perfect love belonged. She sat before the picture a long time. There was in her heart a song of triumph that she had been so much to so strong and noble a man as John Rantoul. Later on the same day she and John went to the gallery together, and

they found it deserted. No one was in the room with them, and for many minutes the silence was unbroken even by their own voices. Their upturned eyes hardly saw the figures in the picture before them. They were dreaming of an exquisite life that might have been theirs, but which could never be. Each heart was beating rapidly to the joyous music of its love. A slight movement brought their hands in contact, and John took Mrs. Randolph's hand in his own and held it. She did not withdraw it, and thus they stood for a time like two happy children. Then suddenly she turned her face towards him, and he saw something that filled his bosom with an ecstasy which he had never felt before. For an instant only he stood looking down at her, then, seizing both her hands and drawing her to him, he said passionately, "Marion — Marion" — and then he hesitated. But she still looked at him sweetly, confidingly, and with a light in her eyes that he could not misinterpret, so that he drew her close to him, and putting his arm about her whispered to her, eagerly, and still with questioning in his voice — "Marion, you love me, darling, you love me?"

And she, at last overcome by the power of her love, bent her head, and answered softly, "Yes."

He seized her in his arms again, and cried out, "Marion, it is our fate, we cannot help it. We have struggled, and we are conquered." He kissed her again and again, and she yielded to him, feeling all the delicious fervor of her love.

But finally she said to him, "I love you, John, as I never loved before. I have never before known what love is. But we must say good-by, forever, now and here, in the presence of the child of our beautiful love."

He made a movement as if to restrain her. His lips opened as if to utter a denial, but she withdrew herself with such dignity, that he could only bow in acquiescence. She held out her hand to him and he took it, saying nothing. At last she said, "Good-by, my love; good-by, forever!"

He raised her hand and kissed it; then, drawing her again to him, he kissed her lips. Then, with a smile of love and sadness on her face, she went out of his presence.



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